Letters of Sri Aurobindo

(On Poetry and Literature)

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(On Poetry and Literature)

Third Series

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FOREWORD

The letters of Sri Aurobindo included in the present volume deal with a subject different from that of his letters already published in the first two volumes in this Series. These earlier volumes contained letters relating to the philosophy, psychology and practice of his system of Integral Yoga; the present volume is confined only to letters dealing with literary topics, especially those connected with the creation and critical appreciation of poetry. Sri Aurobindo is now well known as a Master-mystic and philosopher and a great poet but very few know that he is also a literary critic of exceptionally fine discernment and unfailing judgment. The faculty of poetic creation is not necessarily combined with the faculty of poetic appreciation and often a distinguished creator of poetry may be a poor judge of his own or other poets' work, but in Sri Aurobindo there is a unique combination of both in a remarkably high degree. His main work in the field of poetic criticism, however, lies embedded in a long series of articles published under the title "The Future Poetry" in the monthly philosophical journal "Arya" which he conducted during the years 1914 to 1921, but this journal has long

become defunct and it may take many years before these articles are resurrected and made available to the public.

The letters in the present volume reveal a different category of Sri Aurobindo's writing on the subject of literary and poetic criticism. They were not intended to give any systematic and exhaustive treatment of the subject but were written by way of comments or explanatory remarks to a few of his disciples who were writing poetry under his inspiration and direction and who used to submit their work to him for guidance and help, incidentally putting him various questions regarding the inspiration and vision, the form and technique or the style and substance of poetry and sometimes more general questions about literature and art. A very large corpus of this writing relates to a critical examination and appraisement of particular lines or phrases of poems of his poet-disciples but as it would be unintelligible unless read along with the original poems it has been here left out as unsuitable for publication. Only those letters have been selected for inclusion in this volume which discuss poetry or literature in a general way. They have been arranged and grouped under separate sections so as to construct, from these occasional comments made on the works of different poets at different times, as complete a picture as possible of Sri Aurobindo's views on the main issues in the field of literary creation and appreciation.

The intention in making these letters available to the public is that the illuminating advice which Sri Aurobindo

gave to his few poet-disciples may also prove helpful to others who have a true impulse of literary creation and are in need of sure guidance to direct it on right lines. They will prove of especial help to those who are attempting to write spiritual and mystical poetry, for here Sri Aurobindo is not only a supreme Master himself but also a leader and guide to all who wish to explore the endless vistas of the infinite Spiritual Muse.

23-6-1949 *K. H. G.*

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SECTION ONE

THE PROCESS, FORM AND SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

Three Elements of Poetic Creation

POETRY, if it deserves the name at all, comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outer mind and other external instruments for transmission only. There are here three elements, the original source of inspiration, the vital force of creative beauty which gives its substance and impetus and determines the form, and the transmitting outer consciousness of the poet. The most genuine and perfect poetry is written when the original source is able to throw its inspiration pure and unaltered into the vital and there it takes its true native form and power of speech exactly reproducing the inspiration, while the outer consciousness is entirely passive and transmits without alteration what it receives. When the vital is too active and gives too much of its own initiative or a translation into more or less turbid vital stuff, the poetry remains powerful but is inferior in quality and less authentic. Finally, if the outer consciousness is too lethargic and blocks, or too active and makes its own version, then you have the poetry that fails.

It is also the interference of these two parts either by obstruction or by too great an activity of their own or by both together that causes the difficulty and labour of writing. There would be no difficulty if the inspiration came through without obstruction or interference in a pure transcription—and that is what happens in a poet's highest or freest moments when he writes not at all out of his own external human mind but by inspiration, as the mouthpiece of the Gods.

As for the originating source it may be anywhere, the subtle physical plane, the higher or lower vital itself, the dynamic or creative intelligence, the plane of dynamic vision, the psychic, the illumined mind—even, though this is the rarest, the Overmind. To get the Overmind inspiration through is so rare that there are only a few lines or short passages in all poetic literature that give at least some appearance or reflection of it. As for your personal question, it is the original source of D's inspiration and the good will of his vital (emotional) channel that makes his poetry so spontaneous; the psychic inspiration takes at once its true form and speech in the vital and is transmitted without any interference or only a minimum of interference by the brain-mind. That is usually the character of the lyrical inspiration (D's gift is essentially lyrical)—to flow out of the being—

whether it comes from the vital or the psychic, it is usually spontaneous, for these are the two most powerfully impelling and spontaneous parts of the nature. Your source is on the contrary the creative (poetic) intelligence and, at your best, the illumined mind; but a poetry which comes from this quarter is always apt to be arrested by the outer intellect. This intellect is an absurdly overactive part of the nature; it always thinks that nothing can be well done unless it puts its finger into the pie and therefore it instinctively interferes with the inspiration, blocks half or more than half of it and labours to substitute its own inferior and toilsome productions for the true speech and rhythm that ought to have come. The poet labours in anguish to get the one true word, the authentic rhythm, the real divine substance of what he has to say, while all the time it is waiting complete and ready behind, but is not allowed transmission by some part of the transmitting agency which prefers to try to translate and is not willing merely to receive and transcribe. When you get something through from the illumined mind, then you produce something really fine and great. When you get with labour or without it something reasonably like what the poetic intelligence wanted to say, then you make something fine or adequate, but not great. When the brain is at work trying to

fashion out of itself or to give its own version of what the higher sources are trying to pour down, then you manufacture something either quite inadequate or faulty or, at the best, "good on the whole", but not the thing you ought to write.

2-6-1931

Three Essentials for Writing Poetry

I HAVE gone through your poems. For poetry three things are necessary. First, there must be emotional sincerity and poetical feeling and this your poems show that you possess. Next, a mastery over language and a faculty of rhythm perfected by a knowledge of the technique of poetic and rhythmic expression; here the technique is imperfect, true faculty is there but in the rough and there is not yet an original and native style. Finally, there must be the power of inspiration, the creative energy, and that makes the whole difference between the poet and the good verse-writer. In your poems this is still very uncertain—in some passages it almost comes out, but in the rest it is not evident.

I would suggest to you not to turn your energies in this direction at present. Allow your consciousness to grow. If when the consciousness develops, a greater energy of inspiration comes, not out of the ordinary but out of the Yogic consciousness, then you can write and, if it is found that the energy not only comes from the true source but is able to mould for itself the true transcription in rhythm and language, can continue.

6-6-1932

Essence of Inspiration

THERE can be inspiration also without words—a certain intensity in the light and force and substance of the knowledge is the essence of inspiration.

18-6-1933

Poetic Fluency

IT is precisely the people who are careful, self-critical, anxious for perfection who have interrupted visits from the Muse. Those who don't

mind what they write, trusting to their genius, vigour or fluency to carry it off are usually the abundant writers. There are exceptions, of course. "The poetic part caught in the mere mind" is an admirable explanation of the phenomenon of interruption. Fluent poets are those who either do not mind if they do not always write their very best or whose minds are sufficiently poetic to make even their "not best" verse pass muster or make a reasonably good show. Sometimes you write things that are good enough, but not your best, but both your insistence and mine—for I think it essential for you to write your best always, at least your "level best"—may have curbed the fluency a good deal.

The check and diminution forced on your prose was compensated by the much higher and maturer quality to which it attained afterwards. It would be so, I suppose, with the poetry; a new level of consciousness once attained, there might well be a new fluency. So there is not much justification for the fear.

Inspiration and Effort

Few poets can keep for a very long time a sustained level of the highest inspiration. The best poetry does

not usually come by streams except in poets of a supreme greatness though there may be in others than the greatest long-continued wingings at a considerable height. The very best comes by intermittent drops, though sometimes three or four gleaming drops at a time. Even in the greatest poets, even in those with the most opulent flow of riches like Shakespeare, the very best is comparatively rare.

All statements are subject to qualification. What Lawrence states* is true in principle, but in practice most poets have to sustain the inspiration by industry. Milton in his later days used to write every day fifty lines; Virgil nine which he corrected and recorrected till it was within half way of what he wanted. In other words he used to write under any conditions and pull at his inspiration till it came. Usually the best lines, passages, etc. come like that.

Correction by Second Inspiration

It is a second inspiration which has come in improving on the first. When the improving is done

* "One can only write creative stuff when it comes—otherwise it is not much good".

by the mind and not by a pure inspiration then the retouches spoil more often than they perfect.

Joy of Poetic Creation

Poetry can start from any plane of consciousness although like all art—or, one might say, all creation —it must always come through the vital if it is to be alive. And as there is always a joy in creation, that joy along with a certain *enthousiasmos*—not enthusiasm, if you please, but *anandamaya avesh*— must always be there whatever the source. But your poetry differs from the lines you quote. Your inspiration comes from the linking of the vital creative instrument to a deeper psychic experience, and it is that which makes the whole originality and peculiar individual power and subtle and delicate perfection of your poems. It was indeed because this linking-on took place that the true poetic faculty suddenly awoke in you; for it was not there before, at least on the surface. The joy you feel, therefore, was no doubt partly the simple joy of creation, but there comes also into it the joy of expression of the psychic being which was seeking for an outlet since your boyhood. It is this that justifies your poetry-writing as a part of your sadhana.

Pressure of Creative Formation

I KNOW very well this pressure of a creative formation to express itself and be fulfilled. When it presses like that there is nothing to do but to let it have its way, so as to leave the mind unoccupied and clear; otherwise it will be pushed two ways and would not be in the condition of ease necessary for concentration.

Form and Substance of Poetry

ON the general question the truth seems to me to be very simple. It may be quite true that fine or telling rhythms without substance (substance of idea, suggestion, feeling) are hardly poetry at all, even if they make good verse. But that is no ground for belittling beauty or excellence of form or ignoring its supreme importance for poetic perfection. Poetry is after all an art and a poet ought to be an artist of word and rhythm, even though necessarily, like other artists, he must also be something more than that, even much more. I hold therefore that harshness and roughness are not merits but serious faults to be avoided by anyone who wants his work to be true poetry and survive. One can be strong and

powerful, full of sincerity and substance without being harsh, rough or aggressive to the ear. On one side much of Swinburne's later poetry is a mere body of rhythmic sound without a soul, but what of Browning's constant deliberate harshness and roughness or, let us say, excessive sturdiness (not to speak of much marshy ground and very flat levels), which deprive much of his work of the claim to be poetry, —even when it has force, it fails to be poetry of a high order. For this and other reasons much discredit has fallen upon it and it is fairly certain that posterity will carefully and with good reason forget to read a considerable part of what he has written. Energy enough there is and abundance of matter even when he is not at his best and these carry the day for a time and give fame; but it is only writing perfect in its own kind that endures and brings a sure and self-existent immortality. Or if these cruder portions last it will be only by association with the perfection of the same poet's work at his best. I may say also that if mere rhythmic acrobacies of the kind to which you very rightly object condemn a poet's work to inferiority and a literature deviating on to that line to decadence, the drive towards a harsh strength and rough energy of form and substance may easily lead to another kind of undesirable acrobacy, an opposite road towards individual

inferiority and general decadence. Why should not Bengali poetry go on to the straight way of its progress without running either upon the rocks of roughness or into the shallows of mere melody? Austerity of course is another matter; rhythm can either be austere to bareness or sweet and subtle, and a harmonious perfection can be attained in either of these extreme directions if the mastery is there.

As for rules—rules are necessary but they are not absolute; one of the chief tendencies of genius is to break old rules and make departures which create new ones. English poetry of today luxuriates in movements which the mind of yesterday would have deprecated as too audaciously novel violences or as archaic license, yet it is evident that this has led to discoveries of new rhythmic beauty with a very real charm and power, however unfortunate some of its results may be. Not the formal mind, but the ear must be the judge.

I do not think the appreciation of poetry like yours is dependent on a new technique; it is, as you say, something in the composition of the nature which responds or does not respond to the new note, that determines the rejection or the acceptance. At the same time the development of this new note—the expression of a deeper yogic or mystic experience

in poetry—may very well demand for its fullness new departures in technique, a new turn or turns of rhythm, but these should be, I think, subtle in their difference rather than aggressive.

4-1-1932

Rhythm and Significance

You seem to suggest that significance does not matter and need not enter into the account in judging and feeling poetry....Rhythm and word-music are indispensable but are not the whole of poetry....Certainly the significance and feeling suggested and borne home by the words and rhythms are a capital part of the value of poetry. Shakespeare's lines

> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,

have a skilful and consummate rhythm and word-combination, but this gets its full value as the perfect embodiment of a profound and moving significance, the expression in a few lines of a whole range of human world-experience.

Types of Perfection in Poetry

To the two requisites you mention which are technical—"the rightness of individual words and phrases, the rightness of the general lingual reconstruction of the poetic vision,—that is, the manner, syntactical and psychological, of whole sentences and their coordination",—two others have to be added, a certain smiling sureness of touch and inner breath of perfect perfection, born not made, in the words themselves, and a certain absolute winging movement in the rhythm. Without an inevitable rhythm there can be no inevitable wording. If you understand all that, you are lucky. But how to explain the inexplicable, something that is self-existent? That simply means an absoluteness, one might say, an inexplicably perfect and in-fitting thisness and thereness and thatness and everythingelseness so satisfying in every way as to be unalterable. All perfection is not necessarily inevitability. I have tried to explain in "The Future Poetry"—very unsuccessfully I am afraid—that there are different grades of perfection in poetry: adequateness, effectivity, illumination of language, inspiredness—finally, inevitability. These are things one has to learn to feel, one can't analyse.

All the styles, "adequate", "effective", etc., can be raised to inevitability in their own line.

The supreme inevitability is something more even than that, a speech overwhelmingly sheer, pure and true, a quintessential essence of convincingly perfect utterance. That goes out of all classifications and is unanalysable. Instances would include the most different kinds of style—Keats' "magic casements", Wordsworth's Newton and his "fields of sleep", Shakespeare's "Macbeth has murdered sleep", Homer's descent of Apollo from Olympus, Virgil's "Sunt lachrymae rerum" and his "O passi Graviora."

Homer's passage translated into English would be perfectly ordinary. He gets the best part of his effect from his rhythm. Translated it would run merely like this: "And he descended from the peaks of Olympus, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders arrows and doubly pent-in quiver, and there arose the clang of his silver bow as he moved, and he came made like unto the night." His words too are quite simple but the vowellation and the rhythm make the clang of the silver bow go smashing through the world into universes beyond while the last words give a most august and formidable impression of godhead.

I don't think there is any co-ordination between the differences of style and the different planes of inspiration—unless one can say that the effective

style comes from the higher mind, the illumined from the illumined mind, the inspired from the plane of intuition. But I don't know whether that would stand at all times—especially when each style reaches its inevitable power.

Poetic Austerity and Exuberance

(1)

It is not easy to say precisely what is austerity in the poetic sense—for it is a quality that can be felt, a spirit in the writer and the writing, but if you put it in the strait-waistcoat of a definition or of a set technical method you are likely to lose the spirit altogether. In the spirit of the writing you can feel it as a something constant, self-gathered, grave and severe; it is the quality that one at once is aware of in Milton, Wordsworth, Aeschylus and which even their most fervent admirers would hardly attribute to Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Euripides. But there is also an austerity in the poetic manner and that is more difficult to describe or to fix its borders. At most one can say that it consists in a will to express the thing of which you write,

thought, object or feeling, in its just form and exact power without addition and without exuberance. The austerer method of poetry avoids all lax superfluity, all profusion of unnecessary words, excess of emotional outcry, self-indulgent daub of colour, over-brilliant scattering of images, all mere luxury of external art or artifice. To use just the necessary words and no others, the thought in its simplicity and bare power, the one expressive or revealing image, the precise colour and nothing more, just the exact impression, reaction, simple feeling proper to the object,—nothing spun out, additional, in excess. Any rioting in words, colour, images, emotions, sound, phrase for their own sake, for their own beauty, attraction, luxury of abundant expression would, I suppose, be what your friend means by *uchchwas*. Even, an extreme contemporary tendency seems to condemn the use of image, epithet, colour, pitch or emphasis of any kind, except on the most sparing scale, as a vice. Length in a poem is itself a sin, for length means padding—a long poem is a bad poem, only brief work, intense, lyrical in spirit can be throughout pure poetry. Milton, for example, considered austere by the common run of mortals, would be excluded from the list of the pure for his sprawling lengthiness, his epic rhetoric, his swelling phrases, his cult of the

grandiose. To be perfect you must be small, brief and restrained, meticulous in cut and style.

This extremism in the avoidance of excess is perhaps itself an excess. Much can be done by bareness in poetry—a poetic nudism if accompanied by either beauty and grace or strength and power has its excellence. There can be a vivid or striking or forceful or a subtle, delicate or lovely bareness which reaches to the highest values of poetic expression. There can be also a compact or a stringent bareness —the kind of style deliberately aimed at by Landor; but this can be very stiff and stilted as Landor is in his more ambitious attempts—although he did magnificent things sometimes, like his lines on Rose Aylmer,—you can see there how emotion itself can gain by a spare austerity in self-expression. But it is doubtful whether all these kinds—Wordsworth's lyrics, for example, the *Daffodils*, the *Cuckoo*—can be classed as austere. On the other hand, there can be a very real spirit and power of underlying austerity behind a considerable wealth and richness of expression. Arnold in one of his poems gives the image of a girl beautiful, rich and sumptuous in apparel on whose body, killed in an accident, was found beneath the sumptuousness, next to the skin, an under-robe of sack-cloth. If that is admitted, then Milton can keep his claim to austerity in spite

of his epic fullness and Aeschylus in spite of the exultant daring of his images and the rich colour of his language. Dante is, I think, the perfect type of austerity in poetry, standing between the two extremes and combining the most sustained severity of expression with a precise power and fullness in the language which gives the sense of packed riches —no mere bareness anywhere.

But, after all, exclusive standards are out of place in poetry; there is room for all kinds and all methods. Shakespeare was to the French classicists a drunken barbarian of genius; but his spontaneous exuberance has lifted him higher than their willed severity of classical perfection. All depends on the kind one aims at—expressing what is in oneself—and an inspired faithfulness to the law of perfection in that kind. That needs some explanation, perhaps; but I have here perforce to put a dash and finish.

8-10-1932

(2)

I said that Aeschylus like Milton was austere *au fond*—there is as in Dante a high serious restrained power behind all they write; but the outward form

in Milton is grandiose, copious, lavish of strength and sweep, in Aeschylus bold, high-imaged, strong in colour, in Dante full of concise, packed and significantly forceful turn and phrase. These external riches might seem not restrained enough to the purists of austerity: they want the manner and not the *fond* only to be impeccably austere. I did not mean that Dante reached the summit of austerity in this sense; in fact I said he stood between the two extremes of bare austerity and sumptuosity of language. But even in his language there is a sense of *tapasya*, of concentrated restraint in his expressive force. A in his translation of Dante has let himself go in the direction of eloquence more than Dante who is too succinct for eloquence and he has used also a mystical turn of phrase which is not Dante's—yet he has got something of the spirit in the language, something of Dante's concentrated force of expression into his lines. You have spread yourself out even more than A, but still there is the Dantesque in your lines also,—very much so, I should say,—with only this difference that Dante would have put it into fewer words than you do. It is the Dantesque stretching itself out a little—more large-limbed, permitting itself more space.

Aeschylus' manner cannot be described as *uchchwas*, at least in the sense given to it in my letter.

He is not carefully restrained and succinct in his language like Dante, but there is a certain royal measure even in his boldness of colour and image which has in it the strength of *tapasya* and cannot be called *uchchwas*. I suppose in Bengali this term is used a little indiscriminately for things that are not quite the same in spirit. If mere use of bold image and fullness of expression, epithet, colour, splendour of phrase is *uchchwas*, apart from the manner of their use, I would say that austerity and *uchchwas* of a certain kind are perfectly compatible. At any rate two-thirds of the poetry hitherto recognised as the best in different literatures comes of a combination of these two elements. If I find time I shall one day try to explain this point with texts to support it.

I don't know the Bengali for austerity. *Gambhirya* and other kindred things are or can be elements of austerity, but are not austerity itself. *Anuchchwas* is not accurate; one can be free from *uchchwas* without being austere. The soul of austerity in poetry as in Yoga is *atmasamyama*; all the rest is variable, the outward quality of the austerity itself may be variable.

9-10-1932

(3)

I am still at a loss what to answer about *uchchwas*, because I still don't understand exactly what your correspondent is aiming at in his criticism. There is not more *uchchwas* in Bengali poetry than in English, if by the word is meant rhetoric, free resort to imagery, prolific weaving of words and ideas and sentiments around what one has to say. Indian poetry in the Sanscritic languages—there are exceptions of course—was for the most part more restrained and classic in taste or else more impressionist and incisive than most English poetry; the qualities or defects noted above came into Bengali under the English influence. I don't see therefore the point of his remark that the English language cannot express the Indian temperament. It is true of course to a certain extent, first, because, no foreign language can express what is intimate and peculiar to a national temperament, it tends at once to become falsified and seems exotic, and especially the imagery or sentiment of one language does not go well with that of another; least of all can the temperament of an oriental tongue be readily transferred into a European tongue. What is perfectly simple and straightforward in one becomes emphatic or overcoloured or strange in the other. But that has

nothing to do with *uchchwas* in itself. As to emotion —if that is what is meant—your word effusiveness is rather unfortunate, for effusiveness is not praiseworthy in poetry anywhere; but vividness of emotion is no more reprehensible in English than in Bengali poetry. You give as examples of *uchchwas* among other things Madhusudan's style, Tagore's poem to me, a passage from Govindadas. I don't think there is anything in Madhusudan which an English poet writing in Bengali would have hesitated to father. Tagore's poem is written at a high pitch of feeling perfectly intelligible to anyone who had passed through the exaltation of the Swadeshi days, but not more high pitched than certain things in Milton, Shelley, Swinburne. In Govindadas's lines, —let us translate them into English—

> Am I merely thine? O Love, I am there clinging
> In every limb of thine—there ever in my creation and my dissolution—

the idea is one that would not so easily occur to an English poet, it is an erotic mysticism, easily suggested to a mind familiar with the experiences of Vedanta or Vaishnava mystics; but this is not effusiveness, it is intensity—and an English writer

—e.g. Lawrence—could be quite as intense, but would use a different idea or image.

(4)

There is probably a defect in your solar plexus which makes it refuse to thrill unless it receives a strong punch from poetry—an ornamental, romantic or pathetic punch. But there is also a poetry which expresses things with an absolute truth but without effort, simply and easily, without a word in excess or any laying on of colour, only just the necessary. That kind of achievement is considered as among the greatest things poetry can do.

A phrase, word or line may be quite simple and ordinary and yet taken with another phrase, line or word become the perfect thing.

A line like "Life that is deep and wonder-vast" has what I have called the inevitable quality; with a perfect simplicity and straightforwardness it expresses something in a definite and perfect way that cannot be surpassed; so does "lost in a breath of sound" with less simplicity but with the same inevitability. I do not mean that highly coloured poetry cannot be absolutely inevitable, it can, e.g.

Shakespeare's "In cradle of the rude imperious surge" and many others. But most often highly coloured poetry attracts too much attention to the colour and its brilliance so that the thing in itself is less felt than the magnificence of its dress. All kinds are legitimate in poetry; poetry can be great or perfect even if it uses simple or ordinary expressions, e.g. Dante simply says "In His will is our peace" and in writing that in Italian produces one of the greatest lines in all poetic utterance.

1-4-1938

Epic Greatness and Sublimity

I DON'T know how I differentiate between the epic and the other kinds of poetic power. Victor Hugo in the 'Légende des Siècles' tries to be epic and often succeeds, perhaps even on the whole. Marlowe is sometimes great or sublime, but I would not call him epic. There is a greatness or sublimity that is epic, there is another that is not epic, but more of a romantic type. Shakespeare's line

In cradle of the rude imperious surge

is as sublime as anything in Homer or Milton, but it does not seem to me to have the epic ring, while a very simple line can have it, e.g. Homer's

> Bē de kat' oulumpoio kerēnōn chōomenos kēr.
> (He went down from the peaks of Olympus
> wroth at heart)

or Virgil's

> Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
> Fortunam ex aliis

or Milton's

> Fallen cherub, to be weak is miserable.

What is there in these lines that is not in Shakespeare's and makes them epic (Shakespeare's of course has something else as valuable)? For the moment at least, I can't tell you, but it is there. A tone of the inner spirit perhaps, expressing itself in the rhythm and the turn of the language.... Dante has the epic spirit and tone, what he lacks is the epic élan and swiftness. The distinction you draw—'epic sublimity has a more natural turn of

imagination than the non-epic: it is powerfully wide or deep or high without being outstandingly bold, it also displays less colour'—applies, no doubt, but I do not know whether it is the essence of the thing or only one result of a certain austerity in the epic Muse. I do not know whether one cannot be coloured provided one keeps that austerity which, be it understood, is not incompatible with a certain finesse and sweetness.

19-5-1937

Poetic Nobility and Grandeur: Epic and Ballad Movements

I AM unable to agree that Chapman's poetry is noble or equal, even at its best, to Homer and it seems to me that you have not seized the subtler quality of what Arnold means by noble. "Muscular vigour, strong nervous rhythm" are forceful, not noble. Everywhere in your remarks you seem to confuse nobility and forcefulness but there is between the two a gulf of difference. Chapman is certainly forceful, next to Marlowe, I suppose, the most forceful poet among the Elizabethans. Among the lines you

quote from him to prove your thesis, there is only one that approaches nobility:

Much have I suffered for thy love, much laboured, wished much

—and even then it is spoilt for me by the last two words which are almost feeble. The second quotation:

When the unmeasured firmament bursts to disclose her light

has a rhythm which does not mate with the idea and the diction; these are exceedingly fine and powerful —but not noble. There is no nobility at all in the third:

And such a stormy day shall come, in mind and soul I know,
When sacred Troy shall shed her towers for tears of overthrow.

The first line of the couplet is rhetorical and padded, the second is a violent, indeed extravagant conceit which does not convey any true and high emotion but is intended to strike and startle the intellectual

imagination. One has only to compare Homer's magnificent lines absolute in their nobility of restrained yet strong emotion, in which the words and rhythm give the very soul of the emotion, but in its depth, not with any outward vehemence. In the fourth quotation:

Heard Thetis' foul petition and wished in any wise
The splendour of the burning ships might satiate his eyes

—the first line has the ordinary ballad movement and diction and cannot rank, the second is very fine poetry, vivid, powerful, impressive, with a beginning of grandeur—but the nobility of Homer, Virgil or Milton is not there. The line strikes at the mind with a great vehemence in order to impress it—nobility in poetry enters in and takes possession with an assured gait by its own right. It would seem to me that one has only to put the work of these greater poets side by side with Chapman's best to feel the difference. Chapman no doubt lifts rocks and makes mountains suddenly to rise—in that sense he has elevation or rather elevations; but in doing it he gesticulates, wrestles, succeeds finally with a shout of triumph; that does not give a noble effect or a noble movement. See in contrast with what a self-

possessed grandeur, dignity or godlike ease Milton, Virgil, Homer make their ascensions or keep their high levels.

Then I come to Arnold's example of which you question the nobility on the strength of my description of one essential of the poetically noble. Mark that the calm, self-mastery, beautiful control which I have spoken of as essential to nobility is a poetic, not an ethical or Yogic calm and control. It does not exclude the poignant expression of grief or passion, but it expresses it with a certain high restraint so that even when the mood is personal it yet borders on the widely impersonal. Cleopatra's words* are an example of what I mean; the disdainful compassion for the fury of the chosen instrument of self-destruction which vainly thinks it can truly hurt her, the call to death to act swiftly and yet the sense of being high above what death can do, which

*If thou and nature can so gently part,
The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
Which hurts and is desir'd.

....

...........Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
Of life at once untie: poor venomous fool,
Be angry, and despatch.

—Shakespeare

these few simple words convey has the true essence of nobility. "Impatience" only! You have not caught the significance of the words "poor venomous fool", the tone of the "Be angry and despatch", the tense and noble grandeur of the suicide scene with the high light it sheds on Cleopatra's character. For she was a remarkable woman, a great queen, a skilful ruler and politician, not merely the erotic intriguer people make of her. Shakespeare is not good at describing greatness, he poetised the *homme moyen*, but he has caught something here. The whole passage stands on a par with the words of Antony "I am dying, Egypt, dying" (down to "A Roman by a Roman, valiantly vanquished") which stand among the noblest expressions of high, deep, yet collected and contained emotion in literature—though that is a masculine and this a feminine nobility. There is in the ballad of Sir Patrick Spense the same poignancy and restraint—something that gives a sense of universality and almost impersonality in the midst of the pathetic expression of sorrow. There is a quiver but a high compassionate quiver, there is no wail or stutter or vehemence. As for the rhythm, it may be the ballad "alive", but it is not "kicking"—and it has the overtones and undertones which ballad rhythm has not at its native level. Then for the other example

you have given—lines didactic in intention can be noble, as for instance, the example quoted by Arnold from Virgil,

> Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
> Fortunam ex aliis,

or the line quoted from Apollo's speech about the dead body of Hector and Achilles' long-nourished and too self-indulgent rage against it. Dryden's two lines,

> Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
> But leave to heaven the measure and the choice,

are less fine and harmonious in their structure; there is something of a rhetorical turn and therefore it reaches a lower height of nobility, but nobility there is, especially in the second line of the couplet. I do not find it cold; there is surely a strong touch of poetic emotion there.

I may say, however, that grandeur and nobility are kindred but not interchangeable terms. One can be noble without reaching grandeur—one can be grand without the subtle quality of nobility. Zeus Olympius is grand and noble; Ravana or Briareus with the thousand arms is grand without being

noble. Lear going mad in the storm is grand, but too vehement and disordered to be noble. I think the essential difference between the epic movement and ballad rhythm and language lies in this distinction between nobility and force—in the true ballad usually a bare, direct and rude force. The ballad metre has been taken by modern poets and lifted out of its normal form and movement, given subtle turns and cadences and made the vehicle of lyric beauty and fervour or of strong or beautiful narrative; but this is not the true original ballad movement and ballad motive. Scott's movement is narrative, not epic—there is also a lyrical narrative movement and that is the quality reached by Coleridge, perhaps the finest use yet made of the ballad movement. It is doubtful whether the ballad form can bear the epic lift for more than a line or two, a stanza or two—under the epic stress the original jerkiness remains while the lyric flow smooths it out. When it tries to lift to the epic height, it does so with a jerk, an explosive leap or a quick canter; one feels the rise, but there is still something of the old trot underneath the movement. It is at least what I feel throughout in Chesterton—there is a sense of effort, of disguise with the crudity of the original form still showing through the brilliantly coloured drapery that has been put upon it. If there

is no claim to epic movement I do not mind and can take it for what it can give, but comparisons with Homer and Virgil and the classic hexameter are perilous and reveal the yawning gulf between the two movements. As to the line of fourteen syllables, Chapman often overcomes its difficulties but the jogtrot constantly comes out. It may be that all that can be surmounted but Chapman and Chesterton do not surmount it—whatever their heights of diction or imagination, the metre interferes with their maintenance, even, I think, with their attaining their full eminence. Possibly a greater genius might wipe out the defect—but would a greater genius have cared to make the endeavour?

I have left myself no space or time for Chesterton as a poet and it is better so because I have not read "The Ballad of the White Horse" and know him only by extracts. Your passages establish him as a poet, a fine and vivid poet by intervals, but not as a great or an epic poet—that is my impression. Sometimes I find your praise of particular passages extravagant, as when you seem to put Marlowe's mighty line

> See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament

and Chesterton's facetious turn about the stretched necks and burned beards on a par. Humour can be poetic and even epic, like Kaikeyi's praise of Manthara's hump in the Ramayana; but this joke of Chesterton's does not merit such an apotheosis. That is ballad style, not mighty or epic. Again all that passage about Colan and Earl Harold is poor ballad stuff—except the first three lines and the last two—poor in diction, poor in movement. I am unable to enthuse over

> It smote Earl Harold over the eye
> And blood began to run.

The lines marrying the soft sentimentalism of the "small white daisies" with the crude brutality of the "blood out of the brain" made me at first smile with the sense of the incongruous, it seemed almost like an attempt at humour—at least at the grotesque. I prefer Scott's Tunstall; in spite of its want of imagination and breadth it is as good a thing as any Scott has written; on the contrary, these lines show Chesterton far below his best. The passage about the cholera and wheat is less flat; it is even impressive in a way, but impressive by an exaggerated bigness and forced attempt at epic greatness on one side and a forced and exaggerated childish sentimentalism

on the other. The two do not fuse and the contrast is grotesque. This cholera image might be fine out of its context, it is at least forceful and vivid, but applied to a man (not a god or a demigod) it sounds too inflated—while the image of the massacrer muttering sentimentally about bread while he slew is so unnatural as to tread on or over the borders of the grotesque—it raises even a smile like the poor small white daisies red with blood out of Earl Harold's brain. I could criticise further, but I refrain. On the other hand, Chesterton is certainly very fine by flashes. His images and similes and metaphors are rather explosive, sometimes they are mere conceits like the "cottage in the clouds", but all the same they have very often a high poetic quality of revealing vividness. At times also he has fine ideas finely expressed and occasionally he achieves a great lyrical beauty and feeling. He is terribly unequal and unreliable, violent, rocketlike, ostentatious, but at least in parts of this poem he does enter into the realms of poetry. Only, I refuse to regard the poem as an epic—a sometimes low-falling, sometimes high-swinging lyrical narrative is the only claim I can concede to it.

Philosophy in Poetry

WHAT does your correspondent mean by "philosophy" in a poem? Of course if one sets out to write a metaphysical argument in verse like the Greek Empedocles or the Roman Lucretius, it is a risky business and is likely to land you into prosaic poetry which is a less pardonable mixture than poetic prose. Even when philosophising in a less perilous way, one has to be careful not to be flat or heavy. It is obviously easier to be poetic when singing about a skylark than when one tries to weave a robe of verse to clothe the attributes of the Brahman. But that does not mean that there is to be no thought or no spiritual thought or no expression of truth in poetry; there is no great poet who has not tried to philosophise. Shelley wrote about the skylark, but he also wrote about the Brahman.

> Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
> Stains the white radiance of Eternity

is as good poetry as

> Hail to thee, blithe spirit!

There are flights of unsurpassable poetry in the Gita and the Upanishads. These rigid dicta are

always excessive and there is no reason why a poet should allow the expression of his personality or the spirit within him or his whole poetic mind to be clipped, cabined or stifled by any theories or "thou shalt not"-s of this character.

7-12-1931

P.S. And if one were to take stock of your correspondent's theories (that no poems should ever have any philosophy, etc.), then half the world's poetry would have to disappear. Truth and Thought and Light cast into forms of beauty cannot be banished in that cavalier way. Music and art and poetry have striven from the beginning to express the vision of the deepest and greatest things and not the things of the surface only, and it will be so as long as there are poetry and art and music.

Mystic Poetry—Philosophising in Poetry—Objection to Repetition

This is the real stumbling-block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind. The mystic feels real and present, even ever-present to his

experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poetic fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. He uses words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. To the mystic there is no such thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To him, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and he can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to him an image but a fact. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. I hold that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but of something of its beauty, its light or its power.

The theory which discourages the poet from thinking or at least from thinking for the sake of the thought proceeds from an extreme romanticist temper; it reaches its acme on one side in the question of the surrealist, "Why do you want poetry to mean anything?" and on the other in Housman's exaltation of pure poetry which he describes paradoxically as a sort of sublime nonsense which does not appeal at all to the mental intelligence but knocks at the solar plexus and awakes a vital and physical rather than intellectual sensation and response. It is of course not that really but a vividness of imagination and feeling which disregards the mind's positive view of things and its logical sequences; the centre or centres it knocks at are not the brain-mind, not even the poetic intelligence

but the subtle physical, the nervous, the vital or the psychic centre. The poem he quotes from Blake is certainly not nonsense, but it has no positive and exact meaning for the intellect or the surface mind; it expresses certain things that are true and real, not nonsense but a deeper sense which we feel powerfully with a great stirring of some inner emotion, but any attempt at exact intellectual statement of them sterilises their sense and spoils their appeal. This is not the method of the highest spiritual poetry. Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience; it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.

It may be noted that the greater romantic poets did not shun thought; they thought abundantly, almost endlessly. They have their characteristic view of life, something that one might call their

philosophy, their world-view, and they express it. Keats was the most romantic of poets, but he could write "To philosophise I dare not yet"; he did not write "I am too much of a poet to philosophise." To philosophise he regarded evidently as mounting on the admiral's flag-ship and flying an almost royal banner. Spiritual philosophic poetry is different; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple, not admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a 'poeticism' which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.

I am justifying a poet's right to think as well as to see and feel, his right to "dare to philosophise". I agree with the modernists in their revolt against the romanticist's insistence on emotionalism and his objection to thinking and philosophical reflection in poetry. But the modernist went too far in his revolt. In trying to avoid what I may call poeticism he ceased to be poetic; wishing to escape from rhetorical writing, rhetorical pretension to greatness and beauty of style, he threw out true poetic greatness and beauty, turned from a deliberately poetic style to a colloquial tone and even to very flat writing; especially he turned away from poetic rhythm to a prose or half-prose rhythm or to no rhythm at all. Also he has weighed too much on thought and has lost the habit of intuitive sight; by turning emotion out of its intimate chamber in the house of Poetry, he has had to bring in to relieve the dryness of much of his thought, too much exaggeration of the lower vital and sensational reactions untransformed or else transformed only by exaggeration. Nevertheless he has perhaps restored to the poet the freedom to think as well as to adopt a certain straightforwardness and directness of style.

Now I come to the law prohibiting repetition. This rule aims at a certain kind of intellectual elegance which comes into poetry when the poetic

intelligence and the call for a refined and classical taste begin to predominate. It regards poetry as a cultured entertainment and amusement of the highly civilised mind; it interests by a faultless art of words, a constant and ingenious invention, a sustained novelty of ideas, incidents, word and phrase. An unfailing variety or the outward appearance of it is one of the elegances of this art. But all poetry is not of this kind; its rule does not apply to poets like Homer or Valmiki or other early writers. The Veda might almost be described as a mass of repetitions; so might the work of Vaishnava poets and the poetic literature of devotion generally in India. Arnold has noted this distinction when speaking of Homer; he mentioned especially that there is nothing objectionable in the close repetition of the same word in the Homeric way of writing. In many things Homer seems to make a point of repeating himself. He has stock descriptions, epithets always reiterated, lines even which are constantly repeated again and again when the same incident returns in his narrative, e.g., the line,

"Doupēsen de pesōm arabēse de teuch 'ep' autō

"Down with a thud he fell and his armour clangoured upon him".

He does not hesitate also to repeat the bulk of a line with a variation at the end, e.g.,

> Bē de kat' oulumpoio karēnōn chōomenos kēr.

And again the

> Bē de kat' oulumpoio karēnōn āïxāsa

"Down from the peaks of Olympus he came wrath vexing his heart-strings" and again, "Down from the peaks of Olympus she came impetuously darting." He begins another line elsewhere with the same word and a similar action and with the same nature of a human movement physical and psychological in a scene of Nature, here a man's silent sorrow listening to the roar of the ocean:

> Be d' akeōn para thīna poluphlois boio thalassēs

"Silent he walked by the shore of the many-rumoured ocean".

In mystic poetry also repetition is not objectionable; it is resorted to by many poets, sometimes with insistence. I may note as an example the constant repetition of the word *Ritam*, Truth, sometimes eight or nine times in a short poem of nine or ten

stanzas and often in the same line. This does not weaken the poem, it gives it a singular power and beauty. The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, key words or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere, a significant structure, a sort of psychological frame, an architecture. The object here is not to amuse or entertain but the self-expression of an inner truth, a seeing of things and ideas not familiar to the common mind, a bringing out of inner experience. It is the true more than the new that the poet is after. He uses *āvṛtti*, repetition, as one of the most powerful means of carrying home what has been thought or seen and fixing it in the mind in an atmosphere of light and beauty. Moreover, the object is not only to present a secret truth in its true form and true vision but to drive it home by the finding of the true word, the true phrase, the *mot juste*, the true image or symbol, if possible the inevitable word; if that is there, nothing else, repetition included, matters much. This is natural when the repetition is intended, serves a purpose; but it can hold even when the repetition is not deliberate but comes in naturally in the stream of the inspiration. I see, therefore, no objection to the recurrence of the same or similar image such as

sea and ocean, sky and heaven in a lone long passage provided each is the right thing and rightly worded in its place. The same rule applies to words, epithets, ideas. It is only if the repetition is clumsy or awkward, too burdensomely insistent, at once unneeded and inexpressive or amounts to a disagreeable and meaningless echo that it must be rejected.

19-3-1946

Poetic Intuition and Critical Intellect

WHAT you have written as the general theory of the matter seems to be correct and it does not differ substantially from what I wrote. But your phrase about unpurposive repetition might carry a suggestion which I would not be able to accept; it might seem to indicate that the poet must have a "purpose" in whatever he writes and must be able to give a logical account of it to the critical intellect. That is surely not the way in which the poet or at least the mystic poet has to do his work. He does not himself deliberately choose or arrange word and rhythm but only sees it as it comes in the very

act of inspiration. If there is any purpose of any kind, it also comes by and in the process of inspiration. He can criticise himself and the work; he can see whether it was a wrong or an inferior movement, he does not set about correcting it by any intellectual method but waits for the true thing to come in its place. He cannot always account to the logical intellect for what he has done; he feels or intuits, and the reader or critic has to do the same.

26-4-1946

The Two Parts of the Poetic Creator

Yes, your poem is forcible enough, but the quality is rather rhetorical than poetic. Only at the end there are two lines which are very fine poetry :

> Gay singing birds caught in a ring of fire

and

> A silent scorn that sears Eternity.

If you could not write the whole in that strain which would have made it epic almost in pitch, it is, I think, because your indignation was largely mental and moral, the emotion though very strong

being too much intellectualised in expression to give the poetic intensity of speech and movement. Indignation, the *saeva indignatio* of Juvenal, can produce poetry, but it must be either vividly a vital revolt which stirs the whole feeling into a white heat of self-expression—as in Milton's famous sonnet—or a high spiritual or deep psychic rejection of the undivine. Besides, it is well known that the emotion of the external being, in the raw as it were, does not make good material for poetry; it has to be transmuted into something deeper, less externally personal, more permanent before it can be turned into good poetry. There are always two parts of oneself which collaborate in poetry—the instrumental which lives and feels what is written, makes a sort of projective identification with it, and the Seer-Creator within who is not involved, but sees the inner significance of it and listens for the word that shall entirely express this significance. It is in some meeting place of these two that what is felt or lived is transmuted into true stuff of poetry. Probably you are not sufficiently detached from this particular life-experience and the reactions it created to go back deeper into yourself and transmute it in this way. And yet you have done it in the two magnificent lines I have noted, which have the virtue of seizing the inner significance behind the

thing experienced in the poetic or interpretative and not in the outward mental way. The first of these two lines conveys the pathos and tragedy of the thing and also the stupidity of the waste much more effectively than pages of denunciation or comment and the other stresses with an extraordinary power in a few words the problem as flung by the revolting human mind and life against the Cosmic Impersonal.

17-7-1931

Need of Life-Experience for Literary Creation

EMOTION alone is not enough for producing anything that can be called creation, at best it can give form to something lyrical and passionate or to something charming or appealing. For any considerable creation there must be a background of life, a vital rich and stored or a mind and an imagination that has seen much and observed much or a soul that has striven and been conscious of its strivings. These are needed, or one or other of them, but the *purdah* is not likely to produce them, though there may be a lucky accident in the worst circumstances, but one can't count on accidents. A George Eliot, a Georges

Sand, a Virginia Wolfe, a Sappho, or even a Comtesse de Nouelles grew up in other circumstances.

30-4-1933

Relation between the Personal Character and Life Experience and the Work of an Artist

THE point that a man's poetry or art need not express anything that has happened in his personal life is rather too obvious to be made so much of. The point is how far it can be supposed to be a transcript of his mind or mental life. It is obvious that his vital cast, his character may have very little to do with his writing, it might be its very opposite; his physical mind also need not determine the character of his writings; the physical mind of a romantic poet or artist may have been that of a commonplace respectable bourgeois; one who in his fiction is a benevolent philanthropist reformer full of cheery optimistic sunshine may have been in actual life selfish, hard, even cruel. All that is now well known and illustrated by numerous examples in the lives of great poets and artists. It is evidently in the inner mental personality of a man that the key to his creation must be discovered, not in his outward

mind or life. Here again a poem or work of art need not be (though it may be) an exact transcription of a mental or spiritual experience; nor, if the creating mind takes up an incident of the life, a vital impression, emotion or reaction that had actually taken place, need it be more than a starting point for the poetic creation. The "I" of a poem is more often than not a dramatic or representative I, nothing less and nothing more. But it does not help to fall back on the imagination and say that all is only the imagination working with whatever material it may happen to choose. The question is how the imagination of a poet came to be cast in this peculiar mould which differentiates him as a creator not only from the millions who do not create but from all other poetic creators. There are two possible answers. A poet or artist may be merely a medium for a creative Force which uses him as a channel and is concerned only with expression in art and not with the man's personality or his inner or outer life. Or, man being a multiple personality, a crowd of personalities which are tangled up on the surface but separate within, the poet or artist in him may be only one of these many personalities and concerned only with its inner and creative function; its work done, it may retire and leave the man to the others. It may or may not use the

experiences of the others as material for its work; it may also meddle with the activity of the others and try to square their make-up and action to its own images and ideals. In fact it is a mixture of the two things that creates the poet. He is a medium for the creative Force which acts through him; it uses or picks up anything stored up in his mind from his inner life or his memories or impressions of outer life and things, anything it can or cares to make use of and this it moulds and turns to its purpose. But still it is through the poet personality in him that it works and this poet personality may be either a mere reed through which the Spirit blows but laid aside after the tune is over, or it may be an active power having some say even in the surface mental composition and vital and physical activities of the total composite creature. In that general possibility there is room for a hundred degrees and variations and no rule can be laid down that covers all cases.

The Illusion of Realism

(1)

I AM afraid your correspondent is under the grip of what I may call the illusion of realism. What all

artists do is to take something from life—even if it be only a partial hint—and transfer it by the magic of their imagination and make a world of their own; the realists, e.g., Zola, Tolstoi, do it as much as anybody else. Each artist is a creator of his own world—why then insist on this legal fiction that the artist's world must appear as an exact imitation of the actual world around us? Even if it does so seem, that is only a skilful make-up, an appearance. It may be constructed to look like that—but why must it be? The characters and creations of even the most strongly objective fiction, much more the characters and creations of poetry live by the law of their own life, which is something in the inner mind of their creator—they cannot be constructed as copies of things outside.

(2)

Why should a creative artist write only about problems?

What a stupidly rigid principle! Can X really write nothing except what he has seen or experienced? What an unimaginative man he must be and how limited!

I wonder whether Victor Hugo had to live in a convict's prison before he created Jean Valjean. Certainly one has to look at life, but there is no obligation to copy faithfully from life. The man of imagination carries a world in himself and a mere hint or suggestion from life is enough to start it going. It is recognised now that Balzac and Dickens created out of themselves their greatest characters which were not at all faithful to the life around them. Balzac's descriptions of society are hopelessly wrong, he knew nothing about it, but his world is much more striking and real than the actual world around him which he misrepresented—even, life has imitated the figures he made, rather than the other way round.

Besides who is living in entire seclusion in Pondicherry? There are living men and women around you and human nature is in full play here as much as in the biggest city—only one has to have an eye to see what is within them and the imagination that takes a few bricks and can make out of them a great edifice. One must be able to see that human nature is one everywhere and pick out of it the essential things that can be turned into great art.

26-5-1934

SECTION TWO

SOURCES OF POETIC INSPIRATION AND VISION— MYSTIC AND SPIRITUAL POETRY

Sources of Poetic Inspiration

ALL poetry is mental or vital or both, sometimes with a psychic tinge; the power from above mind comes in only in rare lines and passages lifting up the mental and vital inspiration towards its own light and power. To work freely from that hidden inspiration is a thing that has not been done though certain tendencies of modern poetry seem to be an unconscious attempt to prepare for that. But in the mind and vital there are many provinces and kingdoms and what you have been writing recently is by no means from the ordinary mind or vital; its inspiration comes from a higher or deeper occult or inner source.

17-5-1937

Vital Poetry

WHAT I mean by vital poetry is that in which appeal to sense or sensation, to the vital thrill, is so dominant that the mental content of the poetry

takes quite a secondary place. Either word and sound tend to predominate over sense or else the nerves and blood are thrilled (e.g. in war poetry) but the mind and soul do not find an equal satisfaction. This does not mean that there is to be no vital element in poetry—without the vital nothing living can be done.

The World of Word-Music

N SEEMS to have put himself into contact with an inexhaustible source of flowing words and rhythm—with the world of word-music, which is one province of the World of Beauty. It is part of the vital world no doubt and the joy that comes of contact with that beauty is vital but it is a subtle vital which is not merely sensuous. It is one of the powers by which the substance of the consciousness can be refined and prepared for sensibility to a still higher beauty and Ananda. Also it can be made a vehicle for the expression of the highest things. The Veda, the Upanishad, the Mantra, everywhere owe half their power to the rhythmic sound that embodies their inner meanings.

2-3-1936

Earth-Memory—Subtle-Vital World of Creative Art—Dream Inspiration

There is an earth-memory from which one gets or can get things of the past more or less accurately according to the quality of the mind that receives them. But this experience is not explicable on that basis—for the Gopis here are evidently not earthly beings and the place R saw was not a terrestrial locality. If she had got it from the earth-mind at all, it could only be from the world of images created by Vaishnava tradition with perhaps a personal transcription of her own. But this also does not agree with all the details.

It is quite usual for poets and musicians and artists to receive things—they can even be received complete and direct, though oftenest with some working of the individual mind and consequent alteration—from a plane above the physical mind, a vital world of creative art and beauty in which these things are prepared and come down through the fit channel. The musician, poet or artist, if he is conscious, may be quite aware and sensitive of this transmission, even feel or see something of the plane from which it comes. Usually, however, this is in the waking state and the contact is not so vivid as that felt by R.

There are such things as dream inspirations—it is rare, however, that these are of any value. For the dreams of most people are recorded by the subconscient. Either the whole thing is a creation of the subconscient and turns out, if recorded, to be incoherent and lacking in any sense, or, if there is a real communication from a higher plane, marked by a sense of elevation and wonder, it gets transcribed by the subconscient and what that forms is either flat or ludicrous. Moreover, this was seen between sleep and waking—and things so seen are not dreams, but experiences from other planes either mental or vital or subtle physical or more rarely psychic or higher plane experiences.

In this case it is very possible that she got into some kind of connection with the actual world of Krishna and the Gopis through the vital. This seems to be indicated first by the sense of extreme rapture and light and beauty and secondly, by the contact with the "Blue Radiance" that was Krishna—that phrase and the expressions she uses have a strong touch of something that was authentic. I say through the vital, because of course it was presented to her in forms and words that her human mind could seize and understand; the original forms of that world would be something that could hardly be seizable by the human sense. The Hindi words

of course belong to the transcribing agency. That would not mean that it was a creation of her personal mind, but only a transcription given to her, just within the bounds of what it could seize, even though unfamiliar to her waking consciousness. Once the receptivity of the mind awakened, the rest came to her freely through the channel created by the vision. That her mind did not create the song is confirmed by the fact that it came in Hindi with so much perfection of language and technique.

To anyone familiar with occult phenomena and their analysis these things will seem perfectly normal and intelligible. The vision-mind in us is part of the inner being, and the inner mind, vital, physical are not bound by the dull and narrow limitations of our outer physcial personality and the small scope of the world it lives in. Its scope is vast, extraordinary, full of inexhaustible interest and, as one goes higher, of glory and sweetness and beauty. The difficulty is to get it through the outer human instruments which are so narrow and crippled and unwilling to receive them.

9-6-1935

Poetry of the Inner Mind and Dynamic Vision

THE inner Mind can get the reflection of the higher experience or, of course, by descent in yoga the higher realisation can come down into the lower planes—that is indeed the object of this Yoga. But what I meant was that the Higher Mind is itself a spiritual plane and that one who lives in it has naturally the realisation of the Self, the One everywhere. The inner Mind has not that naturally, but it can open to it; all the same, between the reflected realisation in the mind and the automatic realisation in the spiritual mental planes there is a difference.

The plane of dynamic vision is a part of the inner Mind and perhaps should be called a province rather than a plane. There are many kinds of vision in the inner Mind and not dynamic vision only. So, to fix invariable characteristics for the poetry of the inner Mind is not easy or even possible. It is a thing to be felt rather than mentally definable. A certain spontaneous intensity of vision is usually there, but not of that large or rich sweep or power which belongs to the Illumined Mind; moreover, it is more subtle and fine and has not the wideness which is the characteristic of the planes that rise towards the Overmind.

Poetic Intelligence and Higher Mind

THE Higher Mind is the first plane where one becomes aware of the Self, the One everywhere and knows and sees things through an elevated thought-power and comprehensive mental sight—not illumined by any of the intense or upper lights but as in a large strong and clear daylight. The poetic intelligence is quite different; it is the mind and its vision moving on the wings of imagination akin to the intellect proper but lifted above it. The Higher Mind is a spiritual plane, this is not. But the larger philosophic and the larger poetic intelligence are nearer to it than the ordinary intellect and may receive its influence. When Milton starts his poem

> Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree—

he is evidently writing from the poetic intelligence. There is nothing of the Higher Mind knowledge or vision either in the substance or style. But there is a largeness of rhythm and sweep of the language which has a certain kinship to the manner natural to what is above. Naturally, something from the higher planes can come into the poetry whose

medium is the poetic intelligence and uplift it. That happens in such lines as

> Those thoughts that wander through eternity.

This applies to most of the classical poets—classical poetry is fundamentally a poetry of the poetic intelligence. But it may be suffused and modified by other influences—generally through some infiltration from the inner Mind which communicates some tinge of a higher afflatus to the poetic intelligence, sometimes through a direct uplifting.

Of course you must understand that the greatness of the poetry as poetry does not necessarily depend on the level from which it is written. Shelley has more access to the inner Mind and through it to greater things than Milton, but he is not the greater poet.

True Inspiration and Poetic Rhetoric

Manmohan's poem* has a considerable elevation of thought, diction and rhythm. It is certainly a fine

* Augustest! dearest! whom no thought can trace,
Name murmuring out of birth's infinity,
Mother! like heaven's great face is thy sweet face,

production and, if all had been equal to the first three lines which are pure and perfect in inspiration, the sonnet might have stood among the finest things in the English language. But somehow it fails as a whole. The reason is that the intellectual mind took up the work of transcription and a Miltonic rhetorical note comes in; all begins to be thought rather than seen or felt; the poet seems to be writing what he thinks he ought to write on such a subject and doing it very well—one admires, the mind is moved and the vital stirred, but the deeper satisfying spiritual thrill which the first lines set out to give is no longer there. Already in the fourth line there is the touch of poetic rhetoric. The original afflatus continues to persist behind, but can no longer speak itself out in its native language;

Stupendous with the mystery of me.
Eyes elder than the light; cheek that no flower
Remembers; brow at which my infant care
Gazed weeping up and saw the skies enshower
With tender rain of vast mysterious hair!
Thou, at whose breast the sunbeams sucked, whose arm
Cradled the lisping ocean, art thou she,
Goddess! at whose dim heart the world's deep charm,
Tears, terrors, throbbing things were yet to be?
She, from whose tearing pangs in glory first
I and the infinite wide heavens burst?

(Manmohan Ghose)

there is a mental translation. It tries indeed to get back—

> Eyes elder than the light—cheek that no flower
> Remembers—

then loses almost altogether—what follows is purely mental. Another effort brings the eighth line which is undoubtedly very fine and has sight behind it. Then there is a compromise; the spiritual seeing mind seems to say to the thinking poetic intellect, "All right, have it your own way—I will try at least to keep you up at your best", and we have the three lines that follow those two others that are forcible and vivid poetic (very poetic) rhetoric —finally a close that goes back to the level of the "stupendous mystery". No, it is not a "splendid confusion"—the poem is well-constructed from the point of view of arrangement of the thought, so there can be no confusion. It is the work of a poet who got into touch with some high level of spiritual sight, a living vision of some spirit truth, but, that not being his native domain, could not keep its perfect voice throughout and mixed his inspiration —that seems to me the true estimate. A very fine poem, all the same.

A Personal Appreciation

It is not a relapse, but an oscillation which one finds in almost every poet. Each has a general level, a highest level and a lower range in which some defects of his poetical faculty come out. You have, three manners: (1) a sort of decorative romantic manner that survives from your early days—this at a lower pitch turns to too much dressiness of an ornamental kind, at a higher to post-Victorian, Edwardian or Georgian rhetoric with a frequent saving touch of Yeats; (2) a level at which all is fused into a fine intuitive authenticity and beauty, there is seldom anything to change; (3) a higher level of grander movement and language in which you pull down or reach the influences of the Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Overmind Intuition. The last you have not yet fully mastered so as to write with an absolute certainty and faultlessness except by lines and stanzas or else as a whole in rare moments of total inspiration, but you are moving towards mastery in it. Sometimes these inspirations get mixed up together. It is this straining towards greater height that creates the difficulty, yet it is indispensable for the evolution of your genius. It is not surprising, therefore, that inspiration comes with difficulty often, or that there are dormant

periods or returns of the decorative inspiration. All that is part of the day's work and dejection is quite out of place.

20-4-1937

Poetry of the Intuitive Mind

WHAT you are writing now is 'overhead' poetry—I mean poetry inspired from those planes; before you used to write poems very often from the intuitive mind—these had a beauty and perfection of their own. What I mean by absoluteness here is a full intensely inevitable expression of what comes from above. These lines are original, convincing, have vision, they are not to be rejected, but they are not the highest flight except in single lines. Such variations are to be expected and will be more prominent if you were writing longer poems, for then to keep always or even usually to that highest level would be an extraordinary feat—no poet has managed as yet to write always at his highest flight and here in that kind of poetry it would be still more difficult. The important point is not to fall below a certain level.

The intuitive mind, strictly speaking, stretches from the Intuition proper down to the intuitivised inner mind—it is therefore at once an overhead power and a mental intelligence power. All depends on the amount, intensity, quality of the intuition and how far it is mixed with mind or pure. The inner mind is not necessarily intuitive, though it can easily become so. The mystic mind is turned towards the occult and spiritual, but the inner mind can act without direct reference to the occult and spiritual, it can act in the same field and in the same material as the ordinary mind, only with a larger and deeper power, range and light and in greater unison with the Universal Mind; it can open also more easily to what is within and what is above. Intuitive intelligence, mystic mind, inner mind intelligence are all part of the inner mind operations. In today's poem, for instance—*A Poet's Stammer*—it is certainly the inner mind that has transformed the idea of stammering into a symbol of inner phenomena and into that operation a certain strain of mystic mind enters, but what is prominent is the intuitive inspiration throughout. It blends with the intuitive poetic intelligence in the first stanza, gets touched by the overhead intuition in the second, gets full of it in the third and again rises rapidly to that in the two last lines of the fourth stanza.

This is what I call poetry of the intuitive Mind.

13-5-1937

Poetry of Spiritual Vision

THE spiritual vision must never be intellectual, philosophical or abstract, it must always give the sense of something vivid, living and concrete, a thing of vibrant beauty or a thing of power. An abstract spiritual poetry is possible but that is not A's manner. The poetry of spiritual vision as distinct from that of spiritual thought abounds in images, unavoidably because that is the straight way to avoid abstractness; but these images must be felt as very real and concrete things, otherwise they become like the images used by the philosophic poets, decorative to the thought rather than realities of the inner vision and experience.

28-5-1937

Mystic and Spiritual Poetry

I USED the word mystic in the sense of a certain kind of inner seeing and feeling of things, a way which to the intellect would seem occult and visionary—for this is something different from imagination and its work with which the intellect is familiar. It was in this sense that I said D had not the mystic mind and vision. One can go far in the spiritual way, have plenty of spiritual experiences, spiritual knowledge, spiritual feelings, significant visions and dreams even without having this mystic mind and way of seeing things. So too one may write poetry from different planes or sources of inspiration and expressing spiritual feelings, knowledge, experiences and yet use the poetic intelligence as the thought medium which gives them shape in speech; such poems are not of the mystic type. One may be mystic in this sense without being spiritual—one may also be spiritual without being mystic; or one may be both spiritual and mystic in one. Poems ditto.

Mystic Poetry of Higher and Lower Planes

MYSTIC poetry can be written from any plane, provided the writer gets an inspiration from the

inner consciousness whether mind, vital or subtle physical.

Naturally, the lower planes cannot express the Spirit with its full and native voice as the higher planes do unless something comes down into them from the higher planes.

Sunlight and Moonlight Mystic Poetry— Inspiration and Revelation

I FIND no difficulty in the last stanza of J's poem nor any in connecting it with the two former stanzas. It is a single feeling and subjective idea or vision expressing itself in three facets. In the full night of the spirit there is a luminosity from above in the very heart of the darkness—imaged by the moon and stars in the bosom of the Night. (The night-sky with the moon (spiritual light) and the stars is a well known symbol and it is seen frequently by sadhaks even when they do not know its meaning). In that night of the spirit is the Dream to which or through which a path is found that in the ordinary light of waking day one forgets or misses. In the night of the spirit are shadowy avenues of pain, but even in that shadow the Power of Beauty and

Beatitude sings secretly and unseen the strains of Paradise. But in the light of day the mystic heart of moonlight sorrowfully weeps, suppressed, for even though the nectar of it is there behind, it falters away from this garish light because it is itself a subtle thing of dream, not of conscious waking mind-nature. That is how I understand or rather try mentally to express it. But it is putting a very abstract sense into what should be kept vague in outline but vivid in feeling—by mentalising one puts at once too much and too little in it.

I do not remember the context of the passage you quote from "The Future Poetry", but I suppose I meant to contrast the veiled utterance of what is usually called mystic poetry with the luminous and assured clarity of the fully expressed spiritual experience. I did not mean to contrast it with the mental clarity which is aimed at usually by poetry in which the intelligence or thinking mind is consulted at each step. The concreteness of intellectual imaged description is one thing and spiritual concreteness is another. "Two birds, companions, seated on one tree, but one eats the fruit, the other eats not but watches his fellow"*—that has an illumining spiritual clarity and concreteness to one

* Mundaka Upanishad

who has had the experience, but mentally and intellectually it might mean anything or nothing. Poetry uttered with the spiritual clarity may be compared to sunlight, poetry uttered with the mystic veil to moonlight. But it was not my intention to deny beauty, power or value to the moonlight. Note that I have distinguished between two kinds of mysticism, one in which the realisation or experience is vague, though inspiringly vague, the other in which the experience is revelatory and intimate, but the utterance it finds is veiled by the image, not thoroughly revealed by it. I do not know to which Tagore's recent poetry belongs, I have not read it. But the latter kind of poetry (where there is the intimate experience) can be of great power and value—witness Blake. Revelation is greater than inspiration—it brings the direct knowledge and seeing; inspiration gives the expression, but the two are not always equal. There is even an inspiration without revelation, when one gets the word but the thing remains behind the veil; the transcribing consciousness expresses something with power, like a medium, of which it has not itself the direct sight or the living possession. It is better to get the sight of the thing itself than merely express it by an inspiration which comes from behind the veil, but this kind of poetry too

has often a great light and power in it. The highest inspiration brings the intrinsic word, the spiritual mantra; but even where the inspiration is less than that, has a certain vagueness or fluidity of outline, you cannot say of such mystic poetry that it has no inspiration, not the inspired word at all. Where there is no inspiration there can be no poetry.

10-6-1936

Symbolic and Mystic Poetry

I SUPPOSE the poem you sent me might be described as the poetic rendering of a symbolic vision—it is not a mystic poem. A poem no doubt can be symbolic and mystic at the same time. For instance N's English poem of the vision of the Lion-flame and the Deer-flame, beauty and power, was symbolic and mystic at once. It is when the thing seen is spiritually lived and has an independent vivid reality of its own which exceeds any conceptual significance it may have on the surface that it is mystic. Symbols may be of various kinds; there are those that are concealing images capable of intellectual interpretation but still different from either symbolic or

allegorical figures—and there are those that have a more intimate life of their own and are not conceptual so much as occultly vital in their significance; there are still others that need a psychic or spiritual or at least an inner and intuitive sight to identify oneself fully with their meaning. In a poem which uses conceptual symbols the mind is more active and the reader wants to know what it means to the mind; but as minds differ, the poet may attach one meaning to it and the reader may find another, if the image used is at all an enigmatic one, not mentally clear and precise. In the more deeply symbolist —still more in the mystic—poem the mind is submerged in the vividness of the reality and any mental explanation falls far short of what is felt and lived in the deeper vital or psychic response. This is what Housman in his book tries to explain with regard to Blake's poetry, though he seems to me to miss altogether the real nature of the response. It is not the mere sensation to which what he calls pure poetry appeals but to a deeper inner life or life-soul within us which has profounder depths than the thinking mind and responds with a certain kind of soul-excitement or ecstasy—the physical vibrations on which he lays stress are merely a very outward result of this sudden stir within the occult folds of the being. Mystic poetry can

strike still deeper—it can stir the inmost and subtlest recesses of the life-soul and the secret inner mind at the same time; it can even, if it is of the right kind, go beyond these also to the pure inmost psychic.

A Comparison between Arjava's "Totalitarian" * *and Walter De La Mare's "Listeners"*

De la Mare's poem has a delicate beauty throughout and a sort of daintily fanciful suggestion of the occult world. I do not know if there is anything more. The weakness of it is that it reads like a thing imagined—the images and details are those that might be written of a haunted house on earth which has got possessed by some occult presences. Arjava must no doubt have taken his starting-point from a reminiscence of this poem, but there is nothing else in common with De la Mare—his poem is an extraordinarily energetic and powerful vision of an occult world and every phrase is intimately evocative of the beyond as a thing vividly seen and strongly lived—it is not on earth, this courtyard and this crescent moon, we are at once in an unearthly world and in a place somewhere in the soul of man

* Vide *Poems*, p. 215 by Arjava (J. A. Chadwick)

and all the details, sparing, with a powerful economy of phrase and image and brevity of movement but revelatory in each touch as opposed to the dim moonlight suggestions supported by a profusion of detail and long elaborating development in De la Mare—of course that has its value also—make us entirely feel ourselves there. I therefore maintain my description 'original' not only for the latter part of the poem but for the opening also. It is not an echo, it is an independent creation. Indeed the difference of the two poems comes out most strongly in these very (first eight) lines.

> The faint moonbeams on the dark stair
> That goes down to the empty hall
>
> The dark turf 'neath the starred and leafy sky

are a description of things on earth made occult only by the presence of the phantom listeners. But

> ....the empty eerie courtyard
> With no name

or

> ....a crescent moon swung wanly,
> White as curd

are not earthly, they belong to a terrible elsewhere, while the latter part of the poem carries the elsewhere into a province of the soul. This is the distinction and makes the perfect successfulness of Arjava's poem.

15-10-1936

A Comparison between A's "Pharphar" and Walter De La Mare's "Arabia"

It is indeed charming—De la Mare seems to have an unfailing beauty of language and rhythm and an inspired loveliness of fancy that is captivating. But still it is fancy, the mind playing with its delicate imaginations. A hint of something deeper tries to get through sometimes, but it does not go beyond a hint. That is the difference between his poem and the one it inspired from you. There is some kinship though no sameness in the rhythm and the tone of delicate remoteness it brings with it. But in your poem that something deeper is not hinted, it is caught—throughout—in all the expressions, but especially in such lines as

> When the magic ethers of evening
> Wash one the various day

or

> The beautiful body of Pharphar
> Or its soul of secret sound

or

> This river of infinite distance,
> Pharphar.

These expressions give a sort of body to the occult without taking from it its strangeness and do not leave it in mist or in shadowy image or luminous silhouette. That is what a fully successful spiritual or occult poetry has to do, to make the occult and the spiritual real to the vision of the consciousness, the feeling. The occult is most often materialised as by Scott and Shakespeare or else pictured in mists, the spiritual mentalised, as in many attempts at spiritual poetry—a reflection in the mind is not enough. For success in the former, Arjava's "Totalitarian" with the stark occult reality of its vision is a good example; for the latter there are lines both in his poems and yours that I could instance, but I cannot recall them accurately just now—but have you not somewhere a line

> The mute unshadowed spaces of her mind?

That would be an instance of the concrete convincing reality of which I am speaking—a spiritual state not hinted at or abstractly put as the metaphysical poets most often do it but presented with a tangible accuracy which one who has lived in the silent wideness of his spiritualised mind can at once recognise as the embodiment in word of his experience.

I do not mean for a moment to deny the value of the exquisite texture of dream in De la Mare's representation, but still this completer embodiment achieves more.

16-10-1936

Truth behind Poetic Images

THERE are truths and there are transcriptions of truths; the transcriptions may be accurate or may be free and imaginative. The truth behind a poetic creation is there on some plane or other—supraphysical generally—and from there the suggestion of the image too originally comes; even the whole transcription itself can be contributed from there, but ordinarily it is the mind's faculty of imagination which gives it form and body. Poetic imagination is very usually satisfied with beauty of idea and

image only and the aesthetic pleasure of it, but there is something behind it which supplies the Truth in its images, and to get the transcription also direct from that something or somewhere behind should be the aim of mystic or spiritual poetry. When Shelley made the spirits of Nature speak, he was using his imagination, but there was something behind in him which felt and knew and believed in the truth of the thing he was expressing—he felt that there were forms more real than living man behind the veil. But his method of presentation was intellectual and imaginative, so one misses the full life in these impalpable figures. To get a more intimate and spiritually concrete presentation should be the aim of the mystic poet.

Symbolic poems always come from a mystic region; the allegorical may come from the intellect, but often the allegory itself rests on a concealed symbol and then there is a mystic element.

Nov. 1933

Mystic Symbols

If you expect matter of fact verisimilitude from X or a scientific ornathologically accurate swan, you are

knocking at the wrong door. But I don't see exactly the point of your objection. The lake in this poem is not a lake but a symbol; the swan is not a swan but a symbol. You can't expect the lake merely to ripple and do no hing else. It is as much a symbol as the Bird of Fire or the Bird of the Vedic poet who faced the guardians of the Soma and brought the Soma to Indra (or was it to a Rishi? I have forgotten)—perhaps carrying a pot or several pots in his claws and beak!! for I don't know how else he could have done it. How is he to use the symbol if you don't make allowances for a miraculous Swan? If the Swan does nothing but what an ordinary swan does, it ceases to be a symbol and becomes only a metaphor. The animals of these symbols belong not to earth but to Wonderland.

Symbolism and Allegory

(I)

THERE is a considerable difference between symbolism and allegory; they are not at all the same thing. Allegory comes in when a quality or other abstract thing is personalised and the allegory proper should

be something carefully stylised and deliberately sterilised of the full aspect of embodied life so that the essential meaning or idea may come out with sufficient precision and force of clarity. One can find this method in the old mystery plays and it is a kind of art that has its value. Allegory is an intellectual form; one is not expected to believe in the personalisation of the abstract quality, it is only an artistic device. When in an allegory as in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* the personalisation, the embodiment takes first place and absorbs the major part of the mind's interest, the true style and principle of this art have been abandoned. The allegorical purpose here becomes a submerged strain and is really of secondary importance, our search for it a by-play of the mind; we read for the beauty and interest of the figures and movements presented to us, not for this submerged significance. An allegory must be intellectually precise and clear in its representative figures as well as in their basis, however much adorned with imagery and personal expression; otherwise it misses its purpose. A symbol expresses on the contrary not the play of abstract things or ideas put into imaged form, but a living truth or inward vision or experience of things, so inward, so subtle, so little belonging to the domain of intellectual abstraction and precision that it cannot be brought

out except through symbolic images—the more these images have a living truth ,of their own which corresponds intimately to the living truth they symbolise, suggests the very vibration of the experience itself, the greater becomes the art of the symbolic expression. When the symbol is a representative sign or figure and nothing more, then the symbolic approaches nearer to an intellectual method, though even then it is not the same thing as allegory. In mystic poetry the symbol ought to be as much as possible the natural body of the inner truth or vision, itself an intimate part of the experience.

(2)

Lord, what an incorrigible mentaliser and allegorist you are! If the bird were either consciousness or the psychic or light, it would be an allegory and all the mystic beauty would be gone. A living symbol and a mental allegorical symbol are not the same thing. You can't put a label on the Bird of Marvel any more than on the Bird of Fire or any other of the fauna or flora or population of the mystic kingdoms. They can be described, but to label them destroys their life and makes them only stuffed

specimens in an allegorical museum. Mystic symbols are living things, not abstractions. Why insist on killing them? J has described the Bird and told you all that is necessary about it, the rest you have to feel and live inside, not dissect and put the fragments into neatly arranged drawers.

8-8-1936

Psychic and Esoteric Poetry

THESE poems are quite new in manner—simple and precise and penetrating. What you describe is the psychic fire, *Agni pavaka*, which burns in the deeper heart and from there is lighted in the mind, the vital and the physical body. In the mind Agni creates a light of intuitive perception and discrimination which sees at once what is the true vision or idea and the wrong vision or idea, the true feeling and the wrong feeling, the true movement and the wrong movement. In the vital it is kindled as a fire of right emotion and a kind of intuitive feeling, a sort of tact which makes for the right impulse, the right action, the right sense of things and reaction to things. In the body it initiates a

similar but still more automatic correct response to the things of physical life, sensation, body experience. Usually it is the psychic light in the mind that is first lit of the three, but not always—for sometimes it is the psycho-vital flame that takes precedence.

In ordinary life also there is no doubt an action of the psychic—without it man would be only a thinking and planning animal. But its action there is very much veiled, needing always the mental or vital to express it, usually mixed and not dominant, not unerring therefore; it does often the right thing in the wrong way, is moved by the right feeling but errs as to the application, person, place, circumstance. The psychic, except in a few extraordinary natures, does not get its full chance in the outer consciousness; it needs some kind of Yoga or sadhana to come by its own and it is as it emerges more and more in front that it gets clear of the mixture. That is to say, its presence becomes directly felt, not only behind and supporting, but filling the frontal consciousness and no longer dependent or dominated by its instruments—mind, vital and body, but dominating them and moulding them into luminosity and teaching them their true action.

It is not easy to say whether the poems are esoteric; for these words "esoteric" and "exoteric" are rather

ill-defined in their significance. One understands the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion —that is to say, on one side, creed, dogma, mental faith, religious worship and ceremony, religious and moral practice and discipline, on the other an inner seeking piercing beyond the creed and dogma and ceremony or finding their hidden meaning, living deeply within in spiritual and mystic experience. But how shall we define esoteric poetry? Perhaps what deals in an occult way with the occult may be called esoteric—e.g., the "Bird of Fire", "Trance", etc. "The Two Moons" is, it is obvious, desperately esoteric. But I don't know whether an intimate spiritual experience simply and limpidly told without veil or recondite image can be called esoteric—for the word usually brings the sense of something kept back from the ordinary eye, hidden, occult. Is "Nirvana" for instance an esoteric poem? There is no veil or symbol there —it tries to state the experience as precisely and overtly as possible. The experience of the psychic fire and psychic discrimination is an intimate spiritual experience, but it is direct and simple like all psychic things. The poem which expresses it may easily be something deeply inward, esoteric in that sense, but simple, unveiled and clear, not esoteric in the more usual sense. I rather think,

however, the term "esoteric poem" is a misnomer and some other phraseology would be more accurate.

30-4-1935

Psychic and Overhead Inspiration

THE psychic has two aspects—the soul principle itself which contains all soul possibilities and the psychic being which develops from life to life. The psychic being usually expresses itself through its instruments,—mental, vital, physical,—putting as much of its own stamp on them as possible. But it can seldom put on them the full psychic stamp—until it comes out and takes over the direct government of the nature. It can then receive and express all the spiritual realisations. But the turn of the psychic is different from that of the above-head planes; it has less of greatness, power, wideness, more of sweetness, delicate beauty, beauty of emotion also, fine subtlety of true perception, an intimate language, etc.—Arnold's expression "sweetness and light" can very well be applied to the psychic as the kernel of its nature. The spiritual planes, when they take up these, give them a wider utterance, powerful audacity, strength and space.

Overhead Poetry

WHAT super-excellence? as poetry? When I say that a line comes from a higher or overhead plane or has the Overmind touch I do not mean that it is superior in pure poetic excellence to others from lower planes—that A's lines outshine Shakespeare or Homer for instance. I simply mean that it has some vision, light, etc. from up there and the character of its expression and rhythm are from there. You do not appreciate probably because you catch only the surface mental meaning. The line is very fine from the technical point of view, the distribution of consonantal and vowel sounds being perfect. That, however, is possible on any level of inspiration. These are technical elements, the Overmind touch does not consist in that but in the undertones or overtones of the rhythmic cry and a language which carries in it a great depth or height or width of spiritual vision, feeling or experience. But all that has to be felt, it is not analysable. If I say that the second line[1] is a magnificent expression of an inner reality most intimate and powerful and the first line[2], with its conception of the fire once 'flickering' with the 'cry' of clay but now no longer, is admirably revelatory—you would

[1] The distance-haunted fire of mystic mind

[2] Flickering no longer with the cry of clay

probably reply that it does not convey anything of the kind to you. That is why I do not usually speak of these things in themselves or in their relation to poetry—only with A who is trying to get his inspiration into touch with these planes. Either one must have the experience—e.g., here one must have lived in or glimpsed the mystic mind, felt its fire, been aware of the distances that haunt it, heard the cry of clay mixing with it and the consequent unsteady flickering of its flames and the release into the straight upward burning and so known that this is not mere romantic rhetoric, not mere images or metaphors expressing something imaginative but unreal (that is how many would take it perhaps) but facts and realities of the self, actual and concrete, or else there must be a conspiracy between the solar plexus and the thousand-petalled lotus which makes one feel, if not know, the suggestion of these things through the words and rhythm. As for technique, there is a technique of this higher poetry but it is not analysable and teachable. If, for instance, A had written 'No longer flickering with the cry of clay', it would no longer have been the same thing though the exact mental meaning would be just as before—for the overtone, the rhythm would have been lost in the ordinary staccato clipped movement and with the overtone the rhythmic significance. It would not

have given the suggestion of space and wideness full with the cry and the flicker, the intense impact of that cry and the agitation of the fire which is heard through the line as it is. But to realise that, one must have the inner sight and inner ear for these things; one must be able to hear the sound-meaning, feel the sound-spaces with their vibrations. Again, if he had written 'Quivering no longer with the touch on clay', it would have been a good line, but meant much less and something quite different to the inner experience, though to the mind it would have been only the same thing expressed in a different image—not so to the solar plexus and the thousand-petalled lotus. In this technique it must be the right word and no other, in the right place and in no other, the right sounds and no others, in a design of sound that cannot be changed even a little. You may say that it must be so in all poetry; but in ordinary poetry the mind can play about, chop and change, use one image or another, put this word here or that word there—if the sense is much the same and has a poetical value, the mind does not feel that all is lost unless it is very sensitive and much influenced by the solar plexus. In the overhead poetry these things are quite imperative, it is all or nothing—or at least all or a fall.

Overmind Rhythm and Inspiration

In the lines you quote from Wordsworth—

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,
The winds come to me from the fields of sleep

—it is precisely the Overmind movement that is wanting; in the last line there is something of the Overmind substance expressed not directly but through the highest intuitive consciousness (the plane between the illumined mind and Overmind), and, because it is not direct, the Overmind rhythm is absent. If I have given high praise to a passage, it does not follow that it is from the Overmind; the poetic (aesthetic) value or perfection of a line, passage or poem does not depend on the plane from which it comes, but on the purity and authenticity and power with which it transcribes an intense vision and inspiration from whatever source. Shakespeare is a poet of the vital inspiration, Homer of the subtle physical; but there are no greater poets in any literature. No doubt, if we can get a continuous inspiration from the Overmind, that would mean a greater, sustained height of perfection and spiritual

quality in poetry than has yet been achieved; but we are discussing here short passages and lines.

As for the Overmind rhythm and inspiration, we get nearer to it in another line of Wordsworth, but I do not remember it exactly and I may misquote,—

> And marble face, the index of a mind
> Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone

or a line like Milton's

> Those thoughts that wander through eternity.

One has the sense here of a rhythm which does not begin or end with the line, but has for ever been sounding in the eternal planes and began even in Time ages ago and which returns into the infinite to go sounding on for ages after. In fact, the word-rhythm is only part of what we hear, a support for the rhythm we listen to behind in "the Ear of the ear," *shrotrasya shrotram*. To a certain extent, that is what all great poetry tries to have, but it is only the Overmind rhythm to which it is natural and easy as breathing and in which it is not only behind the word-rhythm but gets into the word-movement

itself and finds a kind of fully supporting body there.

P.S. Lines from the highest intuitive mind-consciousness, as well as those from the Overmind, can have a *mantric* character—the rhythm too may have a certain kinship with *mantric* rhythm, but it may not be the thing itself, only the nearest step towards it.

The Mantra

THE *mantra* (not necessarily in the Upanishads alone) as I have tried to describe it in "The Future Poetry" is what comes from the Overmind inspiration. Its characteristics are a language that says infinitely more than the mere sense of the words seems to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the Infinite and disappears into the Infinite and the power to convey not merely some mental, vital or physical contents or indications or values of the thing it speaks of, but its value and figure in some fundamental and original consciousness which is behind them all. The passages you mention (from the Upanishad and the Gita) have certainly the Overmind accent. But ordinarily, as I have said, the Overmind inspiration does not come out pure in human poetry. It has to

lift it by a seizure and surprise from above into the Overmind largeness; but in doing so there is usually a mixture of the two elements, the uplifting influence and the lower stuff of mind. You must remember that the Overmind is a superhuman consciousness and to be able to write always or purely from an Overmind inspiration wou.d mean the elevation of at least a part of the nature beyond the human level. But to write of these things would need a greater length of exposition than I can give you at present.

But how do you expect a Supramental inspiration to come down here when the Overmind itself is so rarely within human reach? That is always the error of the impatient aspirant, to think he can get the Supermind without going through the intervening stages or to imagine that he has got it when in fact he has only got something from the illumined or intuitive or at the highest some kind of mixed Overmind consciousness.

Overmind and Aesthetics—
Critical Intellect and Mystical Poetry

Obviously, the Overmind and aesthetics cannot be equated together. Aesthetics is concerned mainly

with beauty, but more generally with *rasa*, the response of the mind, the vital feeling and the sense to a certain "taste" in things which often may be but is not necessarily a spiritual feeling. Aesthetics belongs to the mental range and all that depends upon it; it may degenerate into aestheticism or may exaggerate or narrow itself into some version of the theory of "Art for Art's sake". The Overmind is essentially a spiritual power. Mind in it surpasses its ordinary self and rises and takes its stand on a spiritual foundation. It embraces beauty and sublimates it; it has an essential aesthesis which is not limited by rules and canons; it sees a universal and an eternal beauty while it takes up and transforms all that is limited and particular. It is besides concerned with things other than beauty or aesthetics. It is concerned especially with truth and knowledge or rather with a wisdom that exceeds what we call knowledge; its truth goes beyond truth of fact and truth of thought, even the higher thought which is the first spiritual range of the thinker. It has the truth of spiritual thought, spiritual feeling, spiritual sense and at its highest the truth that comes by the most intimate spiritual touch or by identity. Ultimately, truth and beauty come together and coincide, but in between there is a difference. Overmind in all its dealings puts

truth first; it brings out the essential truth (and truths) in things and also its infinite possibilities; it brings out even the truth that lies behind falsehood and error; it brings out the truth of the Inconscient and the truth of the Superconscient and all that lies in between. When it speaks through poetry, this remains its first essential quality; a limited aesthetical artistic aim is not its purpose. It can take up and uplift any or every style or at least put some stamp of itself upon it. More or less all that we have called Overhead poetry has something of this character whether it be from the Overmind or simply intuitive, illumined or strong with the strength of the higher revealing Thought; even when it is not intrinsically Overhead poetry, still some touch can come in. Even Overhead poetry itself does not always deal in what is new or striking or strange; it can take up the obvious, the common, the bare and even the bald, the old, even that which without it would seem stale and hackneyed and raise it to greatness. Take the lines:

> I spoke as one who ne'er would speak again
> And as a dying man to dying men.

The writer is not a poet, not even a conspicuously talented versifier. The statement of the thought is

bare and direct and the rhetorical device used is of the simplest, but the Overhead touch somehow got in through a passionate emotion and sincerity and is unmistakable. In all poetry a poetical aesthesis of some kind there must be in the writer and the recipient; but aesthesis is of many kinds and the ordinary kind is not sufficient for appreciating the Overhead element in poetry. A fundamental and universal aesthesis is needed, something also more intense that listens, sees and feels from deep within and answers to what is far behind the surface. A greater, wider and deeper aesthesis then which can answer even to the transcendent and feel too whatever of the transcendent or spiritual enters into the things of life, mind and sense.

The business of the critical intellect is to appreciate and judge and here too it must judge; but it can judge and appreciate rightly here only if it first learns to see and sense inwardly and interpret. But it is dangerous for it to lay down its own laws or even laws and rules which it thinks it can deduce from some observed practice of the Overhead inspiration and use that to wall in the inspiration; for it runs the risk of seeing the Overhead inspiration step across its wall and pass on leaving it bewildered and at a loss. The mere critical intellect not touched by a rarer sight can do little here. We can take an

extreme case, for in extreme cases certain incompatibilities come out more clearly. What might be called the Johnsonian critical method has obviously little or no place in this field,—the method which expects a precise logical order in thoughts and language and pecks at all that departs from a matter-of-fact or a strict and rational ideative coherence or a sober and restrained classical taste. Johnson himself is plainly out of his element when he deals crudely with one of Gray's delicate trifles and tramples and flounders about in the poet's basin of goldfish breaking it with his heavy and vicious kicks. But also this method is useless in dealing with any kind of romantic poetry. What would the Johnsonian critic say to Shakespeare's famous lines

> Or take up arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them?

He would say, "What a mixture of metaphors and jumble of ideas! Only a lunatic could take up arms against a sea! A sea of troubles is a too fanciful metaphor and, in any case, one can't end the sea by opposing it, it is more likely to end you." Shakespeare knew very well what he was doing; he saw the mixture as well as any critic could and he accepted it because it brought home, with an inspired

force which a neater language could not have had, the exact feeling and idea that he wanted to bring out. Still more scared would the Johnsonian be by any occult or mystic poetry. The Veda, for instance, uses with what seems like a deliberate recklessness the mixture, at least the association of disparate images, of things not associated together in the material world which in Shakespeare is only an occasional departure. What would the Johnsonian make of this *Rik* in the Veda: "That splendour of thee, O Fire, which is in heaven and in the earth and in the plants and in the waters and by which thou hast spread out the wide mid-air, is a vivid ocean of light which sees with a divine seeing"? He would say, "What is this nonsense? How can there be a splendour of light in plants and in water and how can an ocean of light see divinely or otherwise? Anyhow, what meaning can there be in all this, it is a senseless mystical jargon." But, apart from these extremes, the mere critical intellect is likely to feel a distaste or an incomprehension with regard to mystical poetry even if that poetry is quite coherent in its ideas and well-appointed in its language. It is bound to stumble over all sorts of things that are contrary to its reason and offensive to its taste: association of contraries, excess or abruptness or crowding of images, disregard of intellectual limita-

tions in the thought, concretisation of abstractions, the treating of things and forces as if there were a consciousness and a personality in them and a hundred other aberrations from the straight intellectual line. It is not likely either to tolerate departures in technique which disregard the canons of an established order. Fortunately here the modernists with all their errors have broken old bounds and the mystic poet may be more free to invent his own technique.

26-4-1946

Use of "High Light" Words in Spiritual Poetry

AE's remarks about "immensity", etc. are very interesting to me; for these are the very words, with others like them, that are constantly recurring at short intervals in my poetry when I express not spiritual thought but spiritual experience. I knew perfectly well that this recurrence would be objected to as bad technique or an inadmissible technique; but this seems to me a reasoning from the conventions of a past order which cannot apply to a new poetry dealing with spiritual things. A new art of

words written from a new consciousness demands a new technique. AE himself admits that this rule makes a great difficulty because these "high light" words are few in the English language. His solution may do well enough where the realisations which they represent are mental realisations or intuitions occurring on the summits of the consciousness, rare "high lights" over the low tones of the ordinary natural or occult experience (ordinary, of course, to the poet, not to the average man); there his solution would not violate the truth of the vision, would not misrepresent the balance or harmony of its actual tones. But what of one who lives in an atmosphere full of these high lights—in a consciousness in which the finite, not only the occult but even the earthly finite, is bathed in the sense of the eternal, the illimitable infinite, the immensities or intimacies of the timeless? To follow AE's rule might well mean to falsify this atmosphere, to substitute a merely aesthetic fabrication for a true seeing and experience. Truth first—a technique expressive of the truth in the forms of beauty has to be found, if it does not exist. It is no use arguing from the spiritual inadequacy of the English language; the inadequacy does not exist and, even if it did, the language will have to be made adequate. It has been plastic enough in the

past to succeed in expressing all that it was asked to express, however new; it must now be urged to a farther new progress. In fact, the power is there and has only to be brought out more fully to serve the full occult, mystic, spiritual purpose.

Use of Undignified Words in Poetry

I DISPUTE the legitimacy of the comment. It is based on a conventional objection to undignified and therefore presumably unpoetic words and images—an objection which has value only when the effect is uncouth or trivial, but cannot be accepted otherwise as a valid rule. Obviously, it might be difficult to bring in "bobbing" in an epic or other "high" style, although I suppose Milton could have managed it and one remembers the famous controversy about Hugo's "mouchoir". But in poetry of a mystic (occult or spiritual) kind this does not count. The aim is to bring up a vivid suggestion of the thing seen and some significance of the form, movement, etc. through which one can get at the life behind and its meaning; a familiar adjective here can serve its purpose very well as a touch in the picture and there are occasions when no other

could be as true and living or give so well the precise movement needed.

It is the same with the metre—an identical principle applies, a natural kinship between the subject or substance of the poem and its soul-movement. For instance, a certain lightness, a suggestion of faery dance or faery motion may be needed as one element and this would be lost by the choice of a heavier, more dignified rhythm. After all, subject to a proper handling, that is the first important desideratum, an essential harmony between the metrical rhythm and the thing it has to express.

Overhead Inspiration and Overmind Aesthesis

Something more might need to be said in regard to the overhead note in poetry and the overmind aesthesis; but these are exactly the subjects on which it is difficult to write with any precision or satisfy the intellect's demand for clear and positive statement.

I do not know that it is possible for me to say why I regard one line or passage as having the overhead touch or the overhead note while another misses it. When I said that in the lines about the dying man

the touch came in through some intense passion and sincerity in the writer, I was simply mentioning the psychological door through which the thing came. I did not mean to suggest that such passion and sincerity could of itself bring in the touch or that they constituted the overhead note in the lines. I am afraid I have to say what Arnold said about the grand style; it has to be felt and cannot be explained or accounted for. One has an intuitive feeling, a recognition of something familiar to one's experience or one's deeper perception in the substance and the rhythm or in one or the other which rings out and cannot be gainsaid. One might put forward a theory or a description of what the overhead character of the line consists in, but it is doubtful whether any such mentally constructed definition could be always applicable. You speak, for instance, of the sense of the Infinite and the One which is pervasive in the Overhead planes; that need not be explicitly there in the overhead poetic expression or in the substance of any given line: it can be expressed indeed by overhead poetry as no other can express it, but this poetry can deal with quite other things. I would certainly say that Shakespeare's lines

> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

have the overhead touch in the substance, the rhythm and the feeling; but Shakespeare is not giving us here the sense of the One and the Infinite. He is as in the other lines of his which have this note, dealing as he always does with life, with vital emotions and reactions or the thoughts that spring out in the life-mind under the pressure of life. It is not any strict adhesion to a transcendental view of things that constitutes this kind of poetry, but something behind not belonging to the mind or the vital and physical consciousness and with that a certain quality or power in the language and the rhythm which helps to bring out that deeper something. If I had to select the line in European poetry which most suggests an almost direct descent from the overmind consciousness there might come first Virgil's line about "the touch of tears in mortal things":

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

Another might be Shakespeare's

In the dark backward and abysm of Time

or again Milton's

Those thoughts that wander through eternity.

We might also add Wordsworth's line

> The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

There are others less ideative and more emotional or simply descriptive which might be added, such as Marlowe's

> Is this the face that launched a thousand ships
> And burnt the topless towers of Ilion?

If we could extract and describe the quality and the subtle something that mark the language and rhythm and feeling of these lines and underlie their substance we might attain hazardously to some mental understanding of the nature of overhead poetry.

The Overmind is not strictly a transcendental consciousness—that epithet would more accurately apply to the Supramental and to the Sachchidananda consciousness—though it looks up to the transcendental and may receive something from it and though it does transcend the ordinary human mind and in its full and native self-power, when it does not lean down and become part of mind, is superconscient to us. It is more properly a cosmic consciousness, even the very base of the cosmic as we perceive, understand or feel it. It stands behind every parti-

cular in the cosmos and is the source of all our mental, vital or physical actualities and possibilities which are diminished and degraded derivations and variations from it and have not, except in certain formations and activities of genius and some intense self-exceeding, anything of the native overmind quality and power. Nevertheless, because it stands behind as if covered by a veil, something of it can break through or shine through or even only dimly glimmer through and that brings the overmind touch or note. We cannot get this touch frequently unless we have torn the veil, made a gap in it or rent it largely away and seen the very face of what is beyond, lived in the light of it or established some kind of constant intercourse. Or we can draw upon it from time to time without ever ascending into it if we have established a line of communication between the higher and the ordinary consciousness. What comes down may be very much diminished but it has something of that. The ordinary reader of poetry who has not that experience will usually not be able to distinguish but would at the most feel that here is something extraordinarily fine, profound, sublime or unusual,—or he might turn away from it as something too high-pitched and excessive; he might even speak depreciatingly of "purple passages", rhetoric, exaggeration or excess. One who had the line of

communication open, could on the other hand feel what is there and distinguish even if he could not adequately characterise or describe it. The essential character is perhaps that there is something behind of which I have already spoken and which comes not primarily from the mind or the vital emotion or the physical seeing but from the cosmic self and its consciousness standing behind them all and things then tend to be seen not as the mind or heart or body sees them but as this greater consciousness feels or sees or answers to them. In the direct overmind transmission this something behind is usually forced to the front or close to the front by a combination of words which carries the suggestion of a deeper meaning or by the force of an image or, most of all, by an intonation and a rhythm which carry up the depths in their wide wash or long march or mounting surge. Sometimes it is left lurking behind and only suggested so that a subtle feeling of what is not actually expressed is needed if the reader is not to miss it. This is oftenest the case when there is just a touch or note pressed upon something that would be otherwise only of a mental, vital or physical poetic value and nothing of the body of the overhead power shows itself through the veil, but at most a tremor and vibration, a gleam or a glimpse. In the lines I have chosen there is always an unusual

quality in the rhythm, as prominently in Virgil's line, often in the very building and constantly in the intonation and the association of the sounds which meet in the line and find themselves linked together by a sort of inevitable felicity. There is also an inspired selection or an unusual bringing together of words which has the power to force a deeper sense on the mind as in Virgil's

> Sunt lacrimae rerum.

One can note that this line if translated straight into English would sound awkward and clumsy as would many of the finest lines in Rig Veda; that is precisely because they are new and felicitous turns in the original language, discoveries of an unexpected and absolute phrase; they defy translation. If you note the combination of words and sounds in Shakespeare's line

> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

so arranged as to force on the mind and still more on the subtle nerves and sense the utter absoluteness of the difficulty and pain of living for the soul that has awakened to the misery of the world, you can

see how this technique works. Here and elsewhere the very body and soul of the thing seen or felt come out into the open. The same dominant characteristic can be found in other lines which I have not cited,—in Leopardi's

> Insano indegno mistero delle cose
> (The insane and ignoble mystery of things)

or in Wordsworth's

> Voyaging through strange seas of thought,
> alone.

Milton's line lives by its choice of the word "wander" to collocate with "through eternity"; if he had chosen any other word, it would no longer have been an overhead line, even if the surface sense had been exactly the same. On the other hand, take Shelley's stanza—

> We look before and after,
> And pine for what is not:
> Our sincerest laughter
> With some pain is fraught;
> Our sweetest songs are those that tell of
> saddest thought.

This is perfect poetry with the most exquisite melody and beauty of wording and an unsurpassable poignancy of pathos, but there is no touch or note of the overhead inspiration: it is the mind and the heart, the vital emotion, working at their highest pitch under the stress of a psychic inspiration. The rhythm is of the same character, a direct, straightforward, lucid and lucent movement welling out limpidly straight from the psychic source. The same characteristics are found in another short lyric of Shelley's which is perhaps the purest example of the psychic inspiration in English poetry:

> I can give not what men call love;
> But wilt thou accept not
> The worship the heart lifts above
> And the Heavens reject not,—
>
> The desire of the moth for the star,
> Of the night for the morrow,
> The devotion to something afar
> From the sphere of our sorrow?

We have again extreme poetic beauty there, but nothing of the overhead note.

In the other lines I have cited it is really the overmind language and rhythm that have been to

some extent transmitted; but of course all overhead poetry is not from the Overmind, more often it comes from the higher thought, the illumined mind or the pure intuition. This last is different from the mental intuition which is frequent enough in poetry that does not transcend the mental level. The language and rhythm from these other overhead levels can be very different from that which is proper to the Overmind; for the Overmind thinks in a mass; its thought, feeling, vision is high or deep or wide or all these things together: to use the Vedic expression about fire, the divine messenger, it goes vast on its way to bring the divine riches, and it has a corresponding language and rhythm. The higher thought has a strong tread often with bare unsandaled feet and moves in a clear-cut light: a divine power, measure, dignity is its most frequent character. The outflow of the illumined mind comes in a flood brilliant with revealing words or a light of crowding images, sometimes surcharged with its burden of revelations, sometimes with a luminous sweep. The intuition is usually a lightning flash showing up a single spot or plot of ground or scene with an entire and miraculous completeness of vision to the surprised ecstasy of the inner eye; its rhythm has a decisive inevitable sound which leaves nothing essential unheard, but very commonly

is embodied in a single stroke. These however are only general or dominant characters; any number of variations is possible. There are besides mingled inspirations, several levels meeting and combining or modifying each other's notes, and an overmind transmission can contain or bring with it all the rest, but how much of this description will be to the ordinary reader of poetry at all intelligible or clearly identifiable?

There are besides in mental poetry derivations or substitutes for all these styles. Milton's "grand style" is such a substitute for the manner of the Higher Thought. Take it anywhere at its ordinary level or in its higher elevation, there is always or almost always that echo there:

> Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree

or

> On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues

or

> Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides
> And Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.

Shakespeare's poetry coruscates with a play of the hues of imagination which we may regard as a mental substitute for the inspiration of the illumined mind and sometimes by aiming at an exalted note he links on to the illumined overhead inspiration itself as in the lines I have more than once quoted:

> Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
> Seal up the shipboy's eyes and rock his brains
> In cradle of the rude imperious surge?

But the rest of that passage falls away in spite of its high-pitched language and resonant rhythm far below the overhead strain. So it is easy for the mind to mistake and take the higher for the lower inspiration or *vice versa.* Thus Milton's lines might at first sight be taken because of a certain depth of emotion in their large lingering rhythm as having the overhead complexion, but this rhythm loses something of its sovereign right because there are no depths of sense behind it. It conveys nothing but the noble and dignified pathos of the blindness and old age of a great personality fallen into evil days. Milton's architecture of thought and verse is high and powerful and massive, but there are usually no subtle echoes there, no deep chambers:

the occult things in man's being are foreign to his intelligence,—for it is in the light of the poetic intelligence that he works. He does not stray into "the mystic cavern of the heart", does not follow the inner fire entering like a thief with the Cow of Light into the secrecy of secrecies. Shakespeare does sometimes get in as if by a splendid psychic accident in spite of his preoccupation with the colours and shows of life.

I do not know therefore whether I can speak with any certainty about the lines you quote; I would perhaps have to read them in their context first, but it seems to me that there is just a touch, as in the lines about the dying man. The thing that is described there may have happened often enough in times like those of the recent wars and upheavals and in times of violent strife and persecution and catastrophe, but the greatness of the experience does not come out or not wholly, because men feel with the mind and heart and not with the soul; but here there is by some accident of wording and rhythm a suggestion of something behind, of the greatness of the soul's experience and its courageous acceptance of the tragic, the final, the fatal —and its resistance; it is only just a suggestion, but it is enough: the Overhead has touched and passed back to its heights. There is something very different

but of the same essential calibre in the line you quote:

> Sad eyes watch for feet that never come.

It is still more difficult to say anything very tangible about the Overmind aesthesis. When I wrote about it I was thinking of the static aesthesis that perceives and receives rather than of the dynamic aesthesis which creates; I was not thinking at all of superior or inferior grades of poetic greatness or beauty. If the complete Overmind power or even that of the lower Overhead plane could come down into the mind and entirely transform its action, then no doubt there might be greater poetry written than any that man has yet achieved, just as a greater superhuman life might be created if the supermind could come down wholly into life and lift life wholly into itself and transform it. But what happens at present is that something comes down and accepts to work under the law of the mind and with a mixture of the mind and it must be judged by the laws and standards of the mind. It brings in new tones, new colours, new elements, but it does not change radically as yet the stuff of the consciousness with which we labour.

Whether it produces great poetry or not depends

on the extent to which it manifests its power and overrides rather than serves the mentality which it is helping. At present it does not do that sufficiently to raise the work to the full greatness of the worker.

And then what do you mean exactly by greatness in poetry? One can say that Virgil is greater than Catullus and that many of Virgil's lines are greater than anything Catullus ever achieved. But poetical perfection is not the same thing as poetical greatness. Virgil is perfect at his best, but Catullus too is perfect at his best: even, each has a certain exquisiteness of perfection, each in his own kind. Virgil's kind is large and deep, that of Catullus sweet and intense. Virgil's art reached or had from its beginning a greater and more constant ripeness than that of Catullus. We can say then that Virgil was a greater poet and artist of word and rhythm but we cannot say that his poetry, at his best, was more perfect poetry and that of Catullus less perfect. That renders futile many of the attempts at comparison like Arnold's comparison of Wordsworth's *Skylark* with Shelley's. You may say that Milton was a greater poet than Blake, but there can always be people, not aesthetically insensitive, who would prefer Blake's lyrical work to Milton's grander achievement, and there are certainly things in

Blake which touch deeper chords than the massive hand of Milton could ever reach. So all poetic superiority is not summed up in the word greatness. Each kind has its own best which escapes from comparison and stands apart in its own value.

Let us then leave for the present the question of poetic greatness or superiority aside and come back to the Overmind aesthesis. By aesthesis is meant a reaction of the consciousness, mental and vital and even bodily, which receives a certain element in things, something that can be called their taste, Rasa, which passing through the mind or sense or both, awakes a vital enjoyment of the taste, Bhoga, and this can again awaken us, awaken even the soul in us to something yet deeper and more fundamental than mere pleasure and enjoyment, to some form of the spirit's delight of existence, Ananda. Poetry, like all art, serves the seeking for these things, this aesthesis, this Rasa, Bhoga, Ananda; it brings us a Rasa of word and sound but also of the idea and, through the idea, of the things expressed by the word and sound and thought, a mental or vital or sometimes the spiritual image of their form, quality, impact upon us or even, if the poet is strong enough, of their world-essence, their cosmic reality, the very soul of them, the spirit that resides in them as it resides in all things. Poetry

may do more than this, but this at least it must do to however small an extent or it is not poetry. Aesthesis therefore is of the very essence of poetry, as it is of all art. But it is not the sole element and aesthesis too is not confined to a reception of poetry and art; it extends to everything in the world: there is nothing we can sense, think or in any way experience to which there cannot be an aesthetic reaction of our conscious being. Ordinarily, we suppose that aesthesis is concerned with beauty, and that indeed is its most prominent concern: but it is concerned with many other things also. It is the universal Ananda that is the parent of aesthesis and the universal Ananda takes three major and original forms, beauty, love and delight, the delight of all existence, the delight in things, in all things. Universal Ananda is the artist and creator of the universe witnessing, experiencing and taking joy in its creation. In the lower consciousness it creates its opposites, the sense of ugliness as well as the sense of beauty, hate and repulsion and dislike as well as love and attraction and liking, grief and pain as well as joy and delight; and between these dualities or as a grey tint in the background there is a general tone of neutrality and indifference born from the universal insensibility into which the Ananda sinks in its dark negation in

the Inconscient. All this is the sphere of aesthesis, its dullest reaction is indifference, its highest is ecstasy. Ecstasy is a sign of a return towards the original or supreme Ananda: that art or poetry is supreme which can bring us something of the supreme tone of ecstasy. For as the consciousness sinks from the supreme levels through various degrees towards the Inconscience the general sign of this descent is an always diminishing power of its intensity, intensity of being, intensity of consciousness, intensity of force, intensity of the delight in things and the delight of existence. So too as we ascend towards the supreme level these intensities increase. As we climb beyond Mind, higher and wider values replace the values of our limited mind, life and bodily consciousness. Aesthesis shares in this intensification of capacity. The capacity for pleasure and pain, for liking and disliking is comparatively poor on the level of our mind and life; our capacity for ecstasy is brief and limited; these tones arise from a general ground of neutrality which is always dragging them back towards itself. As it enters the overhead planes the ordinary aesthesis turns into a pure delight and becomes capable of a high, a large or a deep abiding ecstasy. The ground is no longer a general neutrality, but a pure spiritual ease and happiness upon which the special tones of

the aesthetic consciousness come out or from which they arise. This is the first fundamental change.

Another change in this transition is a turn towards universality in place of the isolations, the conflicting generalities, the mutually opposing dualities of the lower consciousness. In the Overmind we have a first firm foundation of the experience of a universal beauty, a universal love, a universal delight. These things can come on the mental and vital plane even before those planes are directly touched or influenced by the spiritual consciousness; but they are there a temporary experience and not permanent or they are limited in their field and do not touch the whole being. They are a glimpse and not a change of vision or a change of nature. The artist for instance can look at things only plain or shabby or ugly or even repulsive to the ordinary sense and see in them and bring out of them beauty and the delight that goes with beauty. But this is a sort of special grace for the artistic consciousness and is limited within the field of his art. In the Overhead consciousness, especially in the Overmind, these things become more and more the law of the vision and the law of the nature. Wherever the overmind spiritual man turns he sees a universal beauty touching and uplifting all things, expressing itself through them, moulding them into

a field or objects of its divine aesthesis; a universal love goes out from him to all beings; he feels the Bliss which has created the worlds and upholds them and all that is expresses to him the universal delight, is made of it, is a manifestation of it and moulded into its image. This universal aesthesis of beauty and delight does not ignore or fail to understand the differences and oppositions, the gradations, the harmony and disharmony obvious to the ordinary consciousness: but, first of all, it draws a rasa from them and with that comes the enjoyment, bhoga, and the touch or the mass of the Ananda. It sees that all things have their meaning, their value, their deeper or total significance which the mind does not see, for the mind is only concerned with a surface vision, surface contacts and its own surface reactions. When something expresses perfectly what it was meant to express, the completeness brings with it a sense of harmony, a sense of artistic perfection; it gives even to what is discordant a place in a system of cosmic concordances and the discords become part of a vast harmony, and wherever there is harmony, there is a sense of beauty. Even in form itself, apart from the significance, the Overmind consciousness sees the object with a totality which changes its effect on the percipient even while it remains the same thing. It sees lines and masses

and an underlying design which the physical eye does not see and which escapes even the keenest mental vision. Every form becomes beautiful to it in a deeper and larger sense of beauty than that commonly known to us. The Overmind looks also straight at and into the soul of each thing and not only at its form or its significance to the mind or to the life; this brings to it not only the true truth of the thing but the delight of it. It sees also the one spirit in all, the face of the Divine everywhere and there can be no greater Ananda than that; it feels oneness with all, sympathy, love, the bliss of the Brahman. In a highest, a most integral experience it sees all things as if made of existence, consciousness, power, bliss, every atom of them charged with and constituted of Sachchidananda. In all this the overmind aesthesis takes its share and gives its response; for these things come not merely as an idea in the mind or a truth-seeing but as an experience of the whole being and a total response is not only possible but above a certain level imperative.

I have said that aesthesis responds not only to what we call beauty and beautiful things but to all things. We make a distinction between truth and beauty; but there can be an aesthetic response to truth also, a joy in its beauty, a love created by its charm, a rapture in the finding, a passion in the embrace, an

aesthetic joy in its expression, a satisfaction of love in the giving of it to others. Truth is not merely a dry statement of facts or ideas to or by the intellect; it can be a splendid discovery, a rapturous revelation, a thing of beauty that is a joy for ever. The poet also can be a seeker and lover of truth as well as a seeker and lover of beauty. He can feel a poetic and aesthetic joy in the expression of the true as well as in the expression of the beautiful. He does not make a mere intellectual or philosophical statement of the truth; it is his vision of its beauty, its power, his thrilled reception of it, his joy in it that he tries to convey by an utmost perfection in word and rhythm. If he has the passion, then even a philosophical statement of it he can surcharge with this sense of power, force, light, beauty. On certain levels of the Overmind, where the mind element predominates over the element of gnosis, the distinction between truth and beauty is still valid. It is indeed one of the chief functions of the Overmind to separate the main powers of the consciousness and give to each its full separate development and satisfaction, bring out its utmost potency and meaning, its own soul and significant body and take it on its own way as far as it can go. It can take up each power of man and give it its full potentiality, its highest characteristic development. It can give to intellect its austerest

intellectuality and to logic its most sheer unsparing logicality. It can give to beauty its most splendid passion of luminous form and the consciousness that receives it a supreme height and depth of ecstasy. It can create a sheer and pure poetry impossible for the intellect to sound to its depths or wholly grasp, much less to mentalise and analyse. It is the function of Overmind to give to every possibility its full potential, its own separate kingdom. But also there is another action of Overmind which sees and thinks and creates in masses, which reunites separated things, which reconciles opposites. On that level truth and beauty not only become constant companions but become one, involved in each other, inseparable: on that level the true is always beautiful and the beautiful is always true. Their highest fusion perhaps only takes place in the Supermind; but Overmind on its summits draws enough of the supramental light to see what the Supermind sees and do what the Supermind does though in a lower key and with a less absolute truth and power. On an inferior level Overmind may use the language of the intellect to convey as far as that language can do it its own greater meaning and message but on its summits Overmind uses its own native language and gives to its truths their own supreme utterance, and no intellectual speech, no mentalised poetry can equal

or even come near to that power and beauty. Here your intellectual dictum that poetry lives by its aesthetic quality alone and has no need of truth or that truth must depend upon aesthetics to become poetic at all, has no longer any meaning. For there truth itself is highest poetry and has only to appear to be utterly beautiful to the vision, the hearing, the sensibility of the soul. There dwells and from there springs the mystery of the inevitable word, the supreme immortal rhythm, the absolute significance and the absolute utterance.

I hope you do not feel crushed under this avalanche of metaphysical psychology; you have called it upon yourself by your questioning about the Overmind's greater, larger and deeper aesthesis. What I have written is indeed very scanty and sketchy, only some of the few essential things that have to be said; but without it I could not try to give you any glimpse of the meaning of my phrase. This greater aesthesis is inseparable from the greater truth, it is deeper because of the depth of that truth, larger by all its immense largeness. I do not expect the reader of poetry to come anywhere near to all that, he could not without being a Yogi or at least a sadhak: but just as the overhead poetry brings some touch of a deeper power of vision and creation into the mind without belonging itself wholly to

the higher reaches, so also the full appreciation of all its burden needs at least some touch of a deeper response of the mind and some touch of a deeper aesthesis. Until that becomes general the Overhead or at least the Overmind is not going to do more than to touch here and there as it did in the past, a few lines, a few passages, or perhaps as things advance, a little more, nor is it likely to pour into our utterance its own complete power and absolute value.

I have said that overhead poetry is not necessarily greater or more perfect than any other kind of poetry. But perhaps a subtle qualification may be made to this statement. It is true that each kind of poetical writing can reach a highest or perfect perfection in its own line and in its own quality and what can be more perfect than a perfect perfection or can we say that one kind of absolute perfection is "greater" than another kind? What can be more absolute than the absolute? But then what do we mean by the perfection of poetry? There is the perfection of the language and there is the perfection of the word-music and the rhythm, beauty of speech and beauty of sound, but there is also the quality of the thing said which counts for something. If we consider only word and sound and what in themselves they evoke, we arrive at the application

of the theory of art for art's sake to poetry. On that ground we might say that a lyric of Anacreon is as good poetry and as perfect poetry as anything in Aeschylus or Sophocles or Homer. The question of the elevation or depth or intrinsic beauty of the thing said cannot then enter into our consideration of poetry; and yet it does enter, with most of us at any rate, and is part of the aesthetic reaction even in the most "aesthetic" of critics and readers. From this point of view the elevation from which the inspiration comes may after all matter, provided the one who receives it is a fit and powerful instrument; for a great poet will do more with a lower level of the origin of inspiration than a smaller poet can do even when helped from the highest sources. In a certain sense all genius comes from Overhead; for genius is the entry or inrush of a greater consciousness into the mind or a possession of the mind by a greater power. Every operation of genius has at its back or infused within it an intuition, a revelation, an inspiration, an illumination or at the least a hint or touch or influx from some greater power or level of conscious being than those which men ordinarily possess or use. But this power has two ways of acting: in one it touches the ordinary modes of mind and deepens, heightens, intensifies or exquisitely refines their action but without changing its

modes or transforming its normal character; in the other it brings down into these normal modes something of itself, something supernormal, something which one at once feels to be extraordinary and suggestive of a superhuman level. These two ways of action when working in poetry may produce things equally exquisite and beautiful, but the word "greater" may perhaps be applied, with the necessary qualifications, to the second way and its too rare poetic creation.

The greater bulk of the highest poetry belongs to the first of these two orders. In the second order there are again two or perhaps three levels; sometimes a felicitous turn or an unusual force of language or a deeper note of feeling brings in the overhead touch. More often it is the power of the rhythm that lifts up language that is simple and common or a feeling or idea that has often been expressed and awakes something which is not ordinarily there. If one listens with the mind only or from the vital centre only, one may have a wondering admiration for the skill and beauty of woven word and sound or be struck by the happy way or the power with which the feeling or idea is expressed. But there is something more in it than that; it is this that a deeper, more inward strand of the consciousness has seen and is speaking, and if we listen more

profoundly we can get something more than the admiration and delight of the mind or Housman's thrill of the solar plexus. We can feel perhaps the Spirit of the universe lending its own depth to our mortal speech or listening from behind to some expression of itself, listening perhaps to its memories of

> Old unhappy far-off things
> And battles long ago

or feeling and hearing, it may be said, the vast oceanic stillness and the cry of the cuckoo

> Breaking the silence of the seas
> Among the farthest Hebrides

or it may enter again into Vyasa's

> "A void and dreadful forest ringing with the crickets' cry"

Vanam pratibhayam śūṇyam jhillikāgaṇanināditam

or remember its call to the soul of man

Anityam asukham lokam imam prāpya bhajasva mām

"Thou who hast come to this transient and
unhappy world, love and worship Me."

There is a second level on which the poetry draws into itself a fuller language of intuitive inspiration, illumination or the higher thinking and feeling. A very rich or great poetry may then emerge and many of the most powerful passages in Shakespeare, Virgil or Lucretius or the Mahabharata and Ramayana, not to speak of the Gita, the Upanishads or the Rig Veda have this inspiration. It is a poetry "thick inlaid with patines of bright gold" or welling up in a stream of passion, beauty and force. But sometimes there comes down a supreme voice, the overmind voice and the overmind music and it is to be observed that the lines and passages where that happens rank among the greatest and most admired in all poetic literature. It would be therefore too much to say that the overhead inspiration cannot bring in a greatness into poetry which could surpass the other levels of inspiration, greater even from the purely aesthetic point of view and certainly greater in the power of its substance.

A conscious attempt to write overhead poetry with a mind aware of the planes from which this inspiration comes and seeking always to ascend to those levels or bring down something from them,

would probably result in a partial success; at its lowest it might attain to what I have called the first order, ordinarily it would achieve the two lower levels of the second order and in its supreme moments it might in lines and in sustained passages achieve the supreme level, something of the highest summit of its potency. But its greatest work will be to express adequately and constantly what is now only occasionally and inadequately some kind of utterance of the things above, the things beyond, the things behind the apparent world and its external or superficial happenings and phenomena. It would not only bring in the occult in its larger and deeper ranges but the truths of the spiritual heights, the spiritual depths, the spiritual intimacies and vastnesses as also the truths of the inner mind, the inner life, an inner or subtle physical beauty and reality. It would bring in the concreteness, the authentic image, the inmost soul of identity and the heart of meaning of these things, so that it could never lack in beauty. If this could be achieved by one possessed, if not of a supreme, still of a sufficiently high and wide poetic genius, something new could be added to the domain of poetry and there would be no danger of the power of poetry beginning to fade, to fall into decadence, to fail us. It might even enter into the domain of the infinite and inex-

haustible, catch some word of the Ineffable, show us revealing images which bring us near to the Reality that is secret in us and in all of which the Upanishad speaks,

Anejad ekam manaso javīyo nainad devā
āpnuvan pūrvam arshat. . . .
Tad ejati tan naijati tad dūre tad u antike.

"The One unmoving is swifter than thought, the gods cannot overtake It, for It travels ever in front; It moves and It moves not, It is far away from us and It is very close".

The gods of the Overhead planes can do much to bridge that distance and to bring out that closeness, even if they cannot altogether overtake the Reality that exceeds and transcends them.

29-7-1946

Greatness and Beauty in Poetry

As to the doubt you have expressed, I think there is some confusion still about the use of the word 'great' as distinct from the beautiful. In poetry greatness

must, no doubt, be beautiful in the wider and deeper sense of beauty to be poetry, but the beautiful is not always great.

I do not think I have ever said that all overhead poetry is superior to all that comes from other sources. I am speaking of greatness and said that greatness of substance does count and gives a general superiority; I was referring to work in the mass and not to separate lines and passages. I said, practically, that art in the sense of perfect mastery of technique, perfect expression in word and sound was not everything and greatness and beauty of the substance of the poetry entered into the reckoning. It might be said of Shakespeare that he was not predominantly an artist but rather a great creator, even though he has an art of his own, especially an art of dramatic architecture and copious ornament; but his work is far from being always perfect. In Racine, on the other hand, there is an unfailing perfection; Racine is the complete poetic artist. But if comparisons are to be made, Shakespeare's must surely be pronounced to be the greater poetry, greater in the vastness of its range, in its abundant creativeness, in its dramatic height and power, in the richness of his inspiration, in his world-view, in the peaks to which he rises and the depths which he plumbs—even though he sinks to flatnesses which Racine would have abhorred

—and generally a glory of God's making which is marvellous and unique. Racine has his heights and depths and widenesses, but nothing like this; he has not in him the poetic superman, he does not touch the superhuman level of creation. But all this is mainly a matter of substance and also of height and greatness in language, not of impeccable beauty and perfection of diction and rhythm which ought to rank higher on the principle of art for art's sake.

This is one thing and for the sake of clarity it must be seen by itself in separation from the other points I put forward. The comparison of passages each perfectly beautiful in itself but different in their kind and source of inspiration is a different matter. Here it is a question of the perfection of the poetry, not of its greatness. In the valuation of whole poems Shelley's *Skylark* may be described as a greater poem than his brief and exquisite lyric—'I can give not what men call love'—because of its greater range and power and constant flow of unsurpassable music, but it is not more perfect; if we take separate lines and passages, the stanza 'We look before and after' is not superior in perfection or absoluteness to that in the other poem 'The desire of the moth for the star', even though it strikes a deeper note and may be said to have a richer substance. The absolute is the

absolute and the perfect perfect, whatever difference there may be in the origin of the inspiration; but from the point of view of greatness one perfection may be said to be greater, though not more perfect than another. I would myself say that Wordsworth's line about Newton is greater, though not more perfect than many of those which you have put side by side with it. And this I say on the same principle as the comparison between Shakespeare and Racine: according to the principle of art for art's sake Racine ought to be pronounced a poet superior to Shakespeare because of his consistent and impeccable flawlessness of word and rhythm, but on the contrary Shakespeare is universally considered greater, standing among the few who are supreme. Theocritus is always perfect in what he writes, but he cannot be ranked with Aeschylus and Sophocles. Why not, if art is the only thing? Obviously, because what the others write has an ampler range, a much more considerable height, breadth, depth, largeness. There are some who say that great and long poems have no true value and are mainly composed of padding and baggage and all that matters are the few perfect lines and passages which shine like jewels among a mass of inferior half-worked ore. In that case, the 'great' poets ought to be debunked and the world's poetic production valued only for a few

lyrics, rare superb passages and scattered lines that we can rescue from the laborious mass production of the artifices of word, sound and language.

I come now to the question of the Overmind and whether there is anything in it superior or more perfectly perfect, more absolutely absolute than in the lower planes. If it is true that one can get the same absolute fully on any plane and from any kind of inspiration, whether in poetry or other expressions of the One, then it would seem to be quite useless and superfluous for any human being to labour to rise above mind to Overmind or Supermind and try to bring them down upon earth; the idea of the transformation would become absurd since it would be possible to have the 'form' perfect and absolute anywhere and by a purely earthly means, a purely earthly force. I am reminded of X's logical objection to my idea of the descent of the Divine into us or into the world on the ground, as he put it, that "the Divine is here, from where is He to descend?" My answer is that obviously the Divine is here, although very much concealed; but He is here in essence and He has not chosen to manifest all His powers or His full power in Matter, in Life, in Mind; He has not even made them fit by themselves for some future manifestation of all that, whereas on higher planes there is already that manifestation and by a descent

from them the full manifestation can be brought here. All the planes have their own power, beauty, some kind of perfection realised even among their imperfections; God is everywhere in some power of Himself though not everywhere in His full power, and even if His face does not appear, the rays and glories from it do fall upon things and beings through the veil and bring something of what we call perfect and absolute. And yet perhaps there may be a more perfect perfection, not in the same kind but in a greater kind, a more utter revelation of the absolute. Ancient thought speaks of something that is highest beyond the highest, *paratparam :* there is a supreme beyond what is for us or seems to us supreme. As Life brings in something that is greater than Matter, as Mind brings in something that is greater than Life, so Overmind brings in something that is greater than Mind, and Supermind something that is greater than Overmind—greater, superior not only in the essential character of the planes, but in all respects, in all parts and details, and consequently in all its creation.

But you may say each plane and its creations are beautiful in themselves and have their own perfection and there is no superiority of one to the other. What can be more perfect, greater or more beautiful than the glories and beauties of Matter, the golden

splendour of the sun, the perpetual charm of the moon, the beauty and fragrance of the rose or the beauty of the lotus, the yellow mane of the Ganges or the blue waters of the Jamuna, forests and mountains, and the leap of the waterfall, the shimmering silence of the lake, the sapphire hue and mighty roll of the ocean and all the wonder and marvel that there is on the earth and in the vastness of the material universe? These things are perfect and absolute and there can be nothing more perfect or more greatly absolute. Life and mind cannot surpass them; they are enough in themselves and to themselves; Brindavan would have been perfect even if Krishna had never trod there. It is the same with Life: the lion in its majesty and strength, the tiger in its splendid and formidable energy, the antelope in its grace and swiftness, the bird of paradise, the peacock with its plumes, the birds with their calls and their voices of song have the perfection that Life can create and thinking man cannot better that; he is inferior to the animals in their own qualities, superior only in his mind, his thought, his power of reflection and creation: but his thought does not make him stronger than the lion and the tiger or swifter than the antelope, more splendid to the sight than the bird of paradise or the human beauty of the most beautiful man and woman

superior to the beauty of the animal in its own kind and perfect form. Here too there is a perfection and absoluteness which cannot be surpassed by any superior greatness of nature. Mind also has its own types of perfection and its own absolutes. What intrusion of Overmind or Supermind could produce philosophies more perfect in themselves than the systems of Shankara or Plato or Plotinus or Spinoza or Hegel, poetry superior to Homer's, Shakespeare's, Dante's or Valmiki's, music more superb than the music of Beethoven or Bach, sculpture greater than the statues of Phidias and Michael Angelo, architecture more utterly beautiful than the Taj Mahal, the Parthenon or Boro Budoor or St. Peter's or the great gothic cathedrals? The same may be said of the crafts of ancient Greece and Japan and the Middle Ages or structural feats like the pyramids or engineering feats like Dnieper Dam or inventions and manufactures like the great modern steamships and the motor car. The mind of man may not be equally satisfied with life in general or with its own dealings with life, it may find all that very imperfect, and here perhaps it may be conceded that the intrusion of a higher principle from above might have a chance of doing something better: but here too there are sectional perfections, each complete and sufficient for its

purpose, each perfectly and absolutely organised in its own type, the termite society for instance, the satisfying structure of ant societies or the organised life of the bee-hive. The higher animals have been less remarkably successful than these insects, though perhaps a crows' parliament might pass a resolution that the life of the rookery was one of the most admirable things in the universe. Greek societies like the Spartan evidently considered themselves perfect and absolute in their own type and the Japanese structure of society and the rounding off of its culture and institutions were remarkable in their pattern of perfect organisation. There can be always variations in kind, new types, a progress in variation, but a progress in itself towards a greater perfection or towards some absolute is an idea which has been long indulged in but has recently been strongly denied and at least beyond a certain point seems to have been denied by fact and event. Evolution there may be, but it only creates new forms, brings in new principles of consciousness, new ingenuities of creation but not a more perfect perfection. In the old Hebrew scriptures it is declared that God created everything from the first, each thing in its own type, and looked on his own creation and saw that it was good. If we conclude that Overmind or Supermind do not

exist or, existing, cannot descend into mind, life and body or act upon them or, descending and acting, cannot bring in a greater or more absolute perfection into anything man has done, we should, with the modification that God has taken many ages and not six days to do his work, be reduced to something like this notion, at any rate in principle.

It is evident that there is something wrong and unsatisfying in such a conclusion. Evolution has not been merely something material, only a creation of new forms of Matter, new species of inanimate objects or animate creatures as physical science has at first seen it: it has been an evolution of consciousness, a manifestation of it out of its involution and in that a constant progress towards something greater, higher, fuller, more complete, ever increasing in its range and capacity, therefore to a greater and greater perfection and perhaps finally to an absolute of consciousness which has yet to come, an absolute of its truth, an absolute of its dynamic power. The mental consciousness of man is greater in its perfection, more progressive towards the absolute than the consciousness of the animal, and the consciousness of the overman, if I may so call him, must very evidently be still more perfect, while the consciousness of the superman may be absolute. No doubt, the instinct of the animal is superior to

that of man and we may say that it is perfect and absolute within its limited range and in its own type. Man's consciousness has an infinitely greater range and is more capable in the large, though less automatically perfect, in the details of its work, more laborious in its creation of perfection. The Overmind when it comes will decrease whatever deficiencies there are in human intelligence and the Supermind will remove them altogether; they will replace the perfection of instinct by the more perfect perfection of intuition and what is higher than intuition and thus replace the automatism of the animal by the conscious and self-possessed automatic action of a more luminous gnosis and finally, of an integral truth-consciousness. It is, after all, the greater consciousness that comes in with mind that enables us to develop the idea of values and this idea of the quality of certain values which seem to us perfect and absolute is a view-point which has its validity but must be completed by others if our perception of things is to be entire. No single and separate idea of the mind can be entirely true by itself, it has to complete itself by others which seem to differ from it, even others which seem logically to contradict it, but in reality only enlarge its view-points and put its idea in its proper place. It is quite true that the beauty of material things is perfect in itself and you may say

the descent of Overmind cannot add to the glory of the sun or the beauty of the rose. But, in the first place, I must point out that the rose as it is is something evolved from the dog-rose or the wild rose and is largely a creation of man whose mind is still creating further developments of this type of beauty. Moreover, it is to the mind of man that these things are beautiful, to his consciousness as evolution has developed it, in the values that mind has given to them, to his perceptive and sometimes his creative aesthesis: Overmind, I have pointed out, has a greater aesthesis and, when it sees objects, sees in them what the mind cannot see, so that the value it gives to them can be greater than any value that the mind can give. That is true of its perception, it may be true also of its creation, its creation of beauty, its creation of perfection, its expression of the power of the absolute.

This is in principle the answer to the objection you made, but pragmatically the objection may still be valid; for what has been done by any overhead intervention may not amount for the present to anything more than the occasional irruption of a line or a passage or at most of a new still imperfectly developed kind or manner of poetry which may have larger contents and a higher or richer suggestion but is not intrinsically superior in the essential elements of

poetry, word and rhythm and cannot be confidently said to bring in a more perfect perfection or a more utter absolute. Perhaps it does sometimes, but not so amply or with such a complete and forcible power as to make it recognisable by all. But that may be because it is only an intervention in mind that it has made, a touch, a partial influence, at most a slight infiltration; there has been no general or massive descent or, if there has been any such descent in one or two minds, it has been fundamental but not yet completely organised or applied in every direction; there has been no absolute transformation of the whole being, whole consciousness and whole nature. You say that if the Overmind has a superior consciousness and a greater aesthesis it must also bring in a greater form. That would be true on the Overmind level itself: if there were an overmind language created by the Overmind itself and used by Overmind beings not subject to the limitations of the mental principle or the turbidities of the life principle or the opposition of the inertia of Matter, the half light of ignorance and the dark environing wall of the Inconscient, then indeed all things might be transmuted and among the rest there might be a more perfect and absolute poetry, perfect and absolute not only in snatches and within boundaries but always and in numberless kinds and in the whole:

for that is the nature of Overmind, it is a cosmic consciousness with a global perception and action tending to carry everything to its extreme possibility; the only thing lacking in its creation might be a complete harmonisation of all possibles, for which the intervention of the highest Truth-Consciousness, the Supermind, would be indispensable. But at present the intervention of Overmind has to take mind, life and Matter as its medium and field, work under their dominant condition, accept their fundamental law and method; its own can enter in only initially or partially and under the obstacle of a prevailing mental and vital mixture. Intuition entering into the human mind undergoes a change; it becomes what we may call the mental intuition or the vital intuition or the intuition working inconsciently in physical things: sometimes it may work with a certain perfection and absoluteness, but ordinarily it is at once coated in mind or life with the mental or vital substance into which it is received and gets limited, deflected or misinterpreted by the mind or the life; it becomes a half intuition or a false intuition and its light and power gives indeed a greater force to human knowledge and will but also to human error. Life and mind intervening in Matter have been able only to vitalise or mentalise small sections of it, to produce and develop living

bodies or thinking lives and bodies but they have not been able to make a complete or general transformation of the ignorance of life, of the inertia and inconscience of Matter and large parts of the minds, lives and forms they occupy remain subconscient or inconscient or are still ignorant, like the human mind itself or driven by subconscient forces. Overmind will certainly, if it descends, go further in that direction, effect a greater transformation of life and bodily function as well as mind but the integral transformation is not likely to be in its power; for it is not in itself the supreme consciousness and does not carry in it the supreme force: although different from mind in the principle and methods of its action, it is only a highest kind of mind with the pure intuition, illumination and higher thought as its subordinates and intermediaries; it is an instrument of cosmic possibilities and not the master. It is not the supreme Truth-Consciousness; it is only an intermediary light and power.

As regards poetry, the Overmind has to use a language which has been made by mind, not by itself, and therefore fully capable or receiving and expressing its greater light and greater truth, its extraordinary powers, its forms of greatness, perfection and beauty. It can only strain and intensify this medium as much as possible for its own uses,

but not change its fundamental or characteristically mental law and method; it has to observe them and do what it can to heighten, deepen and enlarge. Perhaps what Mallarmé and other poets were or are trying to do was some fundamental transformation of that kind, but that incurs the danger of being profoundly and even unfathomably obscure or beautifully and splendidly unintelligible. There is here another point of view which it may be useful to elaborate. Poets are men of genius whose consciousness has in some way or another attained to a higher dynamis of conception and expression than ordinary men can hope to have—though ordinary men often have a good try for it, with the result that they sometimes show a talent for verse and an effective language which imposes itself for a time but is not durable. I have said that genius is the result of an intervention or influence from a higher consciousness than the ordinary human mental, a greater light, a greater force; even an ordinary man can have strokes of genius resulting from such an intervention but it is only in a few that the rare phenomenon occurs of a part of the consciousness being moulded into a habitual medium of expression of its greater light and force. But the intervention of this higher consciousness may take different forms. It may bring in, not the higher consciousness

itself but a substitute for it, an uplifted movement of mind which gives a reflection of the character and qualities of the overhead movement. There is a substitute for the expression of the Higher Thought, the Illumination, the pure Intuition giving great or brilliant results, but these cannot be classed as the very body of the higher consciousness. So also there can be a mixed movement, a movement of mind in its full force with flashes from the overhead or even a light sustained for some time. Finally, there can be the thing itself in rare descents, but usually these are not sustained for a long time though they may influence all around and produce long stretches of a high utterance. All this we can see in poetry but it is not easy for the ordinary mind to make these distinctions or even to feel the thing and more difficult still to understand it with an exact intelligence. One must have oneself lived in the light or have had flashes of it in oneself in order to recognise it when it manifests outside us. It is easy to make mistakes of appreciation: it is quite common to miss altogether the tinge of the superior light even while one sees it or to think and say only, "Ah, yes, this is very great poetry."

There are other questions that can arise, objections that can be raised against our admission of a complete equality between the best of all kinds

in poetry. First of all, is it a fact that all kinds of poetry actually stand on an equal level or are potentially capable by intensity in their own kind, of such a divine equality? Satirical poetry, for instance, has often been considered as inferior in essential quality to the epic or other higher kinds of creation. Can the best lines of Juvenal, for instance, the line about the *graeculus esuriens* be the equal of Virgil's *O passi graviora*, or his *sunt lacrimae rerum*? Can Pope's attack on Addison, impeccable in expression and unsurpassable in its poignancy of satiric point and force and its still more poignant conclusion

> Who would not love if such a man there be?
> Who would not weep if Atticus were he?

be put on a same poetical level with the great lines of Shakespeare which I have admitted as having the overmind inspiration? The question is complicated by the fact that some lines or passages of what is classed as satirical verse are not strictly satirical but have the tone of a more elevated kind of poetry and rise to a very high level of poetic beauty,—for instance, Dryden's descriptions of Absalom and Achitophel as opposed to his brilliant assault on the second duke of Buckingham. Or can we say that

apart from this question of satire we can equal together the best from poetry of a lighter kind with that which has a high seriousness or intention, for instance, the mock epic with the epic? There are critics now who are in ecstasies over Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and put it on the very highest level, but we could hardly reconcile ourselves to classing any lines from it with a supreme line from Homer or Milton. Or can the perfect force of Lucan's line,

Victrix causa deis placuit sed victa Catoni,

which has made it immortal induce us to rank it on a level of equality with the greater lines of Virgil? We may escape from this difficulty of our own logic by pointing out that when we speak of perfection we mean perfection of something essential for poetic beauty and not only perfection of speech and verse however excellent and consummate in its own inferior kind. Or we may say that we are speaking not only of perfection but of a kind of perfection that has something of the absolute. But then we may be taxed with throwing overboard our own first principle and ranking poetry according to the greatness or beauty of its substance, its intention and its elevation and not solely on its artistic completeness of language and rhythm in its own kind.

We have then to abandon any thorough-going acceptance of the art for art's sake standpoint and admit that our proposition of the equality of absolute perfection of different kinds, different inspirations of poetry applies only to all that has some quintessence of highest poetry in it. An absolutely accomplished speech and metrical movement, a sovereign technique, are not enough; we are thinking of a certain pitch of flight and not only of its faultless agility and grace. Overmind or overhead poetry must always have in its very nature that essential quality, although owing to the conditions and circumstances of its intervention, the limitation of its action, it can only sometimes have it in any supreme fullness or absoluteness. It can open poetry to the expression of new ranges of vision, experience and feeling, especially the spiritual and the higher mystic, with all their inexhaustible possibilities, which a more mental inspiration could not so fully and powerfully see and express except in moments when something of the overhead power came to its succour; it can bring in new rhythms and a new intensity of language: but so long as it is merely an intervention in mind, we cannot confidently claim more for it. At the same time if we look carefully and subtly at things we may see that the greatest lines or passages in the

world's literature have the Overmind touch or power and that they bring with them an atmosphere, a profound or an extraordinary light, an amplitude of wing which, if the Overmind would not only intervene but descend, seize wholly and transform, would be the first glimpse of a poetry, higher, larger, deeper and more consistently absolute than any which the human past has been able to give us. An evolutionary ascent of all the activities of mind and life is not impossible.

20-11-1946

SECTION THREE

POETIC RHYTHM AND TECHNIQUE

Two Factors in Poetic Rhythm

IF your purpose is to acquire not only metrical skill but the sense and the power of rhythm, to study the poets may do something, but not all. There are two factors in poetic rhythm,—there is the technique (the variation of movement without spoiling the fundamental structure of the metre, right management of vowel and consonantal assonances and dissonances, the masterful combination of the musical element of stress with the less obvious element of quantity, etc.), and there is the secret soul of rhythm which uses but exceeds these things. The first you can learn, if you read with your ear always in a *tapasya* of vigilant attention to these constituents, but without the second what you achieve may be technically faultless and even skilful, but poetically a dead letter. This soul of rhythm can only be found by listening in to what is behind the music of words and sounds and things. You will get something of it by listening for that subtler element in great poetry, but mostly it must either grow or suddenly open in yourself. This sudden opening can come if the Power

within wishes to express itself in that way. I have more than once seen a sudden flowering of capacities in every kind of activity come by a rapid opening of the consciousness, so that one who laboured long without the least success to express himself in rhythm becomes a master of poetic language and cadences almost in a day. Poetry is a question of the right concentrated silence or seeking somewhere in the mind with the right openness to the Word that is trying to express itself—for the Word is there ready to descend in those inner planes where all artistic forms take birth, but it is the transmitting mind that must change and become a perfect channel and not an obstacle.

Importance of Metre and Technique

I DON'T know that Swinburne failed for this reason—before assenting to such a dictum I should like to know which were these poems he spoiled by too much artistry of technique. So far as I remember, his best poems are those in which he is most perfect in artistry, most curious or skilful, most subtle. I think his decline began when he felt himself too much at ease and poured himself out in an endless waste of melody without caring for substance and the finer

finenesses of form. Attention to technique harms only when a writer is so busy with it that he becomes indifferent to substance. But if the substance is adequate, the attention to technique can only give it greater beauty. Even devices like a refrain, internal rhymes, etc. can indeed be great aids to the inspiration and the expression—just as can ordinary rhyme. It is in my view a serious error to regard metre or rhyme as artificial elements, mere external and superfluous equipment restraining the movement and sincerity of poetic form. Metre, on the contrary, is the most natural mould of expression for certain states of creative emotion and vision, it is much more natural and spontaneous than a non-metrical form; the emotion expresses itself best and most powerfully in a balanced rather than in a loose and shapeless rhythm. The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said and once it is found, the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it. There can be no harm therefore in close attention to technique so long as there is no inattention to substance.

There are only two conditions about artistry: (1) that the artistry does not become so exterior as to be no longer art and (2) that substance (in which of course I include *bhava*) is not left behind

in the desert or else art and *bhava* not woven into each other.

August, 1935

Inspiration and Study of Technique

You do not need at all to afflict your inspiration by studying metrical technique—you have all the technique you need, within you. I have never studied prosody myself—in English, at least; what I know I know by reading and writing and following my ear and using my intelligence. If one is interested in the technical study of prosody for its own sake, that is another matter—but it is not at all indispensable.

28-4-1934

English Quantitative Verse and Classical Metres—Melody of English and Bengali Languages

There have been attempts to write in English quantitative verse on the Greek and Latin

principle with the classical metres, attempts which began in the Elizabethan times, but they have not been successful because the method was either too slipshod or tried to adhere too rigidly to the rules of quantity natural to Greek and Latin but not to the English tongue instead of making an adaptation of it for the English ear or, still better, discovering directly in English itself the true principle of an English quantitative metre. I believe it is perfectly possible to acclimatise the quantitative principle in English and with great advantage. I have not seen Bridges' attempts, but I do not see why his failure—if it was one—should damn the possibility. I think one day it will be done.

It is true that English rhythm falls most naturally into the iambic movement. But I do not admit the adverse strictures passed on the other (trochaic, anapaestic, dactylic) bases of metre. All depends on how you handle them,—if as much pains are bestowed on them, as on the iambic, the fault attributed to them will disappear. Even as it is, the trochaic metre in the hands of great poets like Milton, Shelley, Keats does not pall—I do not get tired of the melody of the *Skylark*. Swinburne's anapaestic metres, as in *Dolores* are kept up for pages without difficulty with the most royal ease, without fatigue either to the writer or the reader.

Both trochee and anapaest are surely quite natural to the language. The dactyl is more difficult to continue, but I believe it can be done, even in a long dactylic metre like the hexameter, if interspersed with spondees (as the metre allows) and supported by subtle modulations of rhythm, variations of pause and caesura. The iambic metre itself was at first taxed with monotony in a drumming beat until it was used in a more plastic way by Shakespeare and Milton. All depends on the skill which one brings to the work and the tool is quarrelled with only when the workman does not know how to use it.

The English language is not naturally melodious like the Italian or Bengali—no language with a Teutonic base can be—but it is capable of remarkable harmonic effects and also it can by a skilful handling be made to give out the most beautiful melodies. Bengali and Italian are soft, easy and mellifluous languages—English is difficult and has to be struggled with in order to produce its best effects, but out of that very difficulty has arisen an astonishing plasticity, depth and manifold subtlety of rhythm. These qualities do not repose on metrical handling alone but much more on the less analysable elements of the entire rhythmic structure. The metrical basis itself is a peculiar and subtle combi-

nation on which English rhythm depends without explicitly avowing it,—a skilful and most extraordinarily variable combination of three elements —the numeric foot dependent on the number of syllables, the use of the stress foot and a play of stresses, and a recognisable but free and plastic use of quantitative play (not quantitative feet), all three running into each other.

I am afraid your estimate here is marred by the personal or national habit. One is always inclined to make this claim for one's own language because one can catch every shade and element of it while in another language, however well-learned, the ear is not so clair-audient. I cannot agree that the examples you give of Bengali melody beat hollow the melody of the greatest English lyrists. Shakespeare, Swinburne's best work in *Atalanta* and elsewhere, Shelley at his finest and some others attain a melody that cannot be surpassed. It is a different kind of melody but not inferior.

Bengali has a more melodious basis, it can accomplish melody more easily than English, it has a freer variety of melodies now, for formerly as English poetry is mostly iambic, Bengali poetry used to be mostly *aksharvritta*. (I remember how my brother Manmohan would annoy me by denouncing the absence of melody, the featureless monotony of

Bengali rhythm and tell me how Tagore ought to be read to be truly melodious—like English in stress, with ludicrous effects. That however is by the way.) What I mean is that variety of melodic bases was not conspicuous at that time in Bengali poetry. Nowadays this variety is there and undoubtedly opens possibilities such as perhaps do not exist in other languages.

I do not see, however, how the metrical aspect by itself can really be taken apart from other more subtle elements; I do not mean the spirit and feeling or the sense of the language only, though without depth or adequacy there metrical melody is only a melodious corpse, but the spirit and feeling or subtle (not intellectual) elements of rhythm and it is on these that English depends for the greater power and plasticity of its harmonic and even to a less extent of its melodic effects. In a word, there is truth in what you say but it cannot be pushed so far as you push it.

May, 1934

Comments on Milford's Views on Quantity in English Verse

MILFORD accepts the rule that two consonants after a short vowel make the short vowel long, even if they are outside the word and come in another word following it. To my mind that is an absurdity. I shall go on pronouncing the *y* of *frosty* as short whether it has two consonants after it or only one or none; it remains *frosty* whether it is a *frosty scalp* or *frosty top* or a frosty anything. In no case have I pronounced it or could I consent to pronounce it as *frostee*. My hexameters are intended to be read naturally as one would read any English sentence. But if you admit a short syllable to be long whenever there are two consonants after it, then Bridges' scansions are perfectly justified. Milford does not accept that conclusion; he says Bridges' scansions are an absurdity. But he bases this on his idea that quantitative length does not count in English verse. It is intonation that makes the metre, he says, high tones or low tones—not longs and shorts, and stress is there of the greatest importance. On that ground he refuses to discuss my idea of weight or dwelling of the voice or admit quantity or anything else but tone as determinative of the metre and declares that there is no such thing as metrical length. Perhaps also that is the reason why he counts

frosty as a spondee before *scalp*; he thinks that it causes it to be intoned in a different way. I don't see how it does that; for my part, I intone it just the same before *top* as before *scalp*. The ordinary theory is, I believe, that the *sc* of *scalp* acts as a sort of stile (because of the two consonants) which you take time to cross, so that *ty* must be considered as long because of this delay of the voice, while the *t* of *top* is merely a line across the path which gives no trouble. I don't see it like that; at most, *scalp* is a slightly longer word than *top* and that affects perhaps the rhythm of the line but not the metre; it cannot lengthen the preceding syllable so as to turn a trochee into a spondee. Sanskrit quantitation is irrelevant here (it is the same as Latin or Greek in this respect) for both Milford and I agree that the classical quantitative conventions are not reproducible in English: we both spew out Bridges' eccentric rhythms.

This answers also your question as to what Milford means by "fundamental confusion" regarding *aridity*. He refuses to accept the idea of metrical length. But I am concerned with metrical as well as natural vowel quantities. My theory is that natural length in English depends, or can depend, on the dwelling of the voice giving metrical value or weight to the syllable; in quantitative verse one has to take account of all such dwelling or weight of the voice, both

weight by ictus (stress) and weight by prolongation of the voice (ordinary syllabic length); the two are different, but for metrical purposes in a quantitative verse can rank as of equal value. I do not say that stress turns a short vowel into a long one.

Milford does not take the trouble to understand my theory—he ignores the importance I give to modulations and treats cretics and antibacchii and molossi as if they were dactyls, whereas they are only substitutes for dactyls; he ignores my objection to stressing short insignificant words like *and*, *with*, *but*, *the*—and thinks that I do that everywhere, which would be to ignore my theory. In fact I have scrupulously applied my theory in every detail of my practice. Take, for instance, (*Ahana*, p. 141)

> Art thou not heaven-bound even as I with the
> earth? Hast thou ended.

Here *art* is long by natural quantity though unstressed, which disproves Milford's criticism that in practice I never put an unstressed long as the first syllable of a dactylic foot or spondee, as I should do by my theory. I don't do it often because normally in English rhythm stress bears the foot—a fact to which I have given full emphasis in my theory. That is the reason why I condemn the Bridgean

disregard of stress in the rhythm,—still I do it occasionally whenever it can come in quite naturally*. My quantitative system, as I have shown at great length, is based on the natural movement of the English tongue, the same in prose and poetry, not on any artificial theory.

24-12-1942

* e.g. Opening tribrachs are very frequent in my hexameter. Cf. *Ahana* p. 142:

Is he the first? was there none then before him? shall none come after?

But Milford thinks I have stressed the first short syllable to make them into dactyls—a thing I abhor. Cf. also *Ahana*, p. 153 (initial anapaest):

In the hard / reckoning made by the grey-robed accountant at even

or p. 154 (two anapaests):

Yet survives / bliss in the rhythm of our heart-beats, yet is there / wonder,

or again p. 157:

And we go / stumbling, maddened and thrilled to his dreadful embraces

or in my poem *Ilion*, p. 377:

And the first / Argive fell slain as he leaped on the Phrygian beaches.

There are even opening amphibrachs here and there, Cf. *Ahana* p. 149:

Illumi/nations, trance-seeds of silence, flowers of musing.

Quantitative Metre in Bengali Poetry

This question of quantity is one in which I find it difficult to arrive at a conclusion. You can prove that it can be done and has been successfully done in Bengali, and you can prove and have proved it yourself over again by writing these poems and bringing in the rhythm, the Kallole, which is absent in S. It is quite true also that stylisation is permissible and a recognised form of art—I mean professed and overt stylisation and not that which hides itself under a contrary profession of naturalness or faithful following of external nature. The only question is how much of it Bengali poetry can bear. I do not think the distinction between song and poem goes at all to the root of the matter. The question is whether it is possible to have ease of movement in this kind of quantitative metre. For a few lines it can be very beautiful or for a short poem or a song—that much cannot be doubted. But can it be made a spontaneous movement of Bengali poetry like the ordinary *Matrabrittas* or the others, in which one can walk or run at will without looking at one's steps to see that one does not stumble and without concentrating the reader's mind too much on the technique so that his attention is diverted from the sense and *bhava?* If you can achieve some large and free structure in

which quantity takes a recognised place as part of the foundation,—it need not be reproduction of a Sanskrit metre,—that would solve the problem in the affirmative.

31-5-1932

Failure of Early English Hexameter

FORMER poets failed in the attempt at hexameter because they did not find the right basic line and measure; they forgot that stress and quantity must both be considered in English. Even though in theory the stress alone makes the quantity, there is another kind of true quantity which must be given a subordinate but very necessary recognition; besides, even in stress there are kinds, true and fictitious, major and minor. In analysing the movement of an English line, one could make three independent schemes according to these three bases and the combination would give the value of the rhythm. You can ignore all this in an established metre and go safely by the force of instinct and habit; but for making so difficult an innovation as the hexameter, instinct and habit were not

enough, a clear eye upon all these constituents was needed and it was not there. Longfellow, even Clough, went on the theory of accentual quantity alone and in spite of their talent as versifiers made a mess—producing something that discredited the very idea of the creation of an English hexameter. Other poets made no serious or sustained endeavour. Arnold was interesting so long as he theorised about it, but his practical specimens were disastrous. I have not time to make my point clearer for the moment; I may return to it hereafter.

Accent in English Rhythm

Is it true that the *laghu-guru* is to the Bengali ear as impossible as would be to the English ear the line made up by Tagore: "Autumn flaunteth in his bushy bowers"? In English such a violence could not be entertained for a moment. It was because Spenser and others tried to base their hexameters and pentameters on this flagrant violation of the first law of English rhythm that the first attempt to introduce quantitative metres in English proved a failure. Accent cannot be ignored in English rhythm—it is why in my attempts at

quantitative metre I always count a strongly accentuated syllable, even if the vowel is short, as a long one—for the stress does really make it long for metrical purposes.

21-7-1936

The Alexandrine

I SUPPOSE the Alexandrine has been condemned because no one has ever been able to make effective use of it as a staple metre. The difficulty, I suppose, is its normal tendency to fall into two monotonously equal halves while the possible variations on that monotony seem to stumble often into awkward inequalities. The Alexandrine is an admirable instrument in French verse because of the more plastic character of the movement, not bound to its stresses but only to an equality of metric syllables capable of a sufficient variety in the rhythm. In English it does not work so well; a single Alexandrine or an occasional Alexandrine couplet can have a great dignity and amplitude of sweep in English, but a succession fails or has most often failed to impose itself on the ear. All this, however, may

be simply because the secret of the right handling has not been found: it is at least my impression that a very good rhythmist with the Alexandrine movement secretly born somewhere in him and waiting to be brought out could succeed in rehabilitating the metre.

Octosyllabic Metre

THE regular octosyllabic metre is at once the easiest to write and the most difficult to justify by a strong and original rhythmic treatment; it may be that it is only by filling it with very original thought-substance and image and the deeper tones and sound-significances which these would bring that it could be saved from its besetting obviousness. On the other hand, the melody to which it lends itself, if raised to a certain intensity, can be fraught with a seizing charm that makes us forget the obviousness of the metre.

4-2-1932

Combination of Iambics and Anapaests

IAMBICS and anapaests can be combined in English verse at any time, provided one does not set out to write a purely iambic or a purely anapaestic metre. Mixed anapaest and iamb make a most beautifully flexible lyric rhythm. It has no more connection with free verse than the constellation of the Great Bear has to do with a cat's tail. "Free" verse indicates verse free from the shackles of rhyme and metre, but rhythmic (or trying to be rhythmic) in one way or another. If you put rhymes, that will be considered a shackle and the "free" will kick at the chain....

The Problem of Free Verse

THE problem of free verse is to keep the rhythm and afflatus of poetry while asserting one's liberty as in prose to vary the rhythm and movement at will instead of being tied down to metre and to a single unchangeable form throughout the whole length of a poem. But most writers in this kind achieve prose cut up into lines or something that is half and half and therefore unsatisfying. I think few have escaped this kind of shipwreck.

Imperfect Rhymes

It is no use applying a Bengali ear to English rhythms any more than a French ear to English or an English ear to French metres. The Frenchman may object to English blank verse because his own ear misses the rhyme or the Englishman to the French Alexandrine because he finds it rhetorical and monotonous. Irrelevant objections both. Imperfect rhymes are regarded in English metre as a source of charm in the rhythmic field bringing in possibilities of delicate variation in the constant clang of exact rhymes....

One cannot expect to seize in poetry the finer and more elusive tones, which are so important, in a learned language, however well-learnt, as in one's native and natural tongue—unless of course one succeeds in making it natural, if not native.

Bengali Gadya-Chhanda

I can't say that I have studied or even read Bengali *gadya-chhanda*, so I am unable to pronounce. In fact what is *gadya-chhanda*? Is it the equivalent of European free verse? But there the essence of the thing is that you model each line freely as you like—

regularity of any kind is out of court there. Is it the aim to create a kind of rhymed prose metre? On what principle? N seems to want a movement which will give more volume, strength and sonority than Bengali verse can succeed in creating, but which is yet poetry, not prose arranged in lines and not even, at the best, poetic prose cut into lines of different lengths. All things can be tried—the test is success, true poetic excellence. N has sent me some of his *gadya-chhanda* before. It seemed to me to have much flow and energy, but there is something hanging on to it which weighs, almost drags—is it the ghost of prose? But that is only a personal impression; as I have said, on this subject I am not a qualified judge.

Invention of New Metres

Of course, X is right about the desirability of inventing new *chhandas* and metres. Your friend who combats this view probably means that the very greatest poets seldom invented a metre. I suppose they were too royally lazy to give themselves the trouble and preferred stealing other people's rhythms and polishing them up to perfection,—just as Shakes-

peare stole bodily all his plots from wherever he could find any worth the lifting. But if that applies to Shakespeare or Virgil, still there are others whose achievements made a consummate metrical invention a companion of a high poetic genius—Alcaeus, Sappho, Catullus, Horace. These poets did a great thing in inventing or transferring from other tongues metres new to the language or introducing Greek metrical forms into Latin or perfecting them in the direction of a more careful balance or a more flawless elegance. But, apart from such illustrious precedents, a good thing such as the combination of metrical invention with perfect poetry would still be worth doing even if no one had had the good sense to do it before.

Unpopularity of New Metres—Cryptic Poetry

It is certainly not true that a good metre must necessarily be an easy metre—easy to read or easy to write. In fact, even with old-established perfectly familiar metres, how many of the readers of poetry have an ear which seizes the true movement and the whole subtlety and beauty of the rhythm? It is only in the more popular kind of poems that it gets

in their hearing its full value. It is all the more impossible when you bring in not only new rhythms but a new principle of rhythm—or at least one that is not very familiar—to expect it to be easily followed at first by the many. It is only if you are already a recognised master that by force of your reputation you can impose whatever you like on your public, for then even if they do not catch your drift, they will still applaud you and will take some pains to learn the new principle. If you are imposing a principle not only of rhythm but of scansion to which the ear in spite of past attempts is not trained so as to seize the basic law of the movements in all its variations, a fair amount of incomprehension, some difficulty in knowing how to read the verse is very probable. Easier forms of a new rhythm may be caught in their movements, even if some will not be able to scan it; but other difficult forms may give trouble. All that is no true objection to the attempt at something new: novelty is difficult for the human mind—or ear—to accept, but novelty is asked for all the same in all human activities for their growth, amplitude, richer life. As you say the ear has to be educated—once it is trained, familiar with the principle, what was a difficulty becomes easy, the unusual, first condemned as abnormal or impossible, becomes a normal and daily movement.

As for the charge of being cryptic, that is quite another matter. On what does it base itself? Obscurity due to inadequate expression is one thing, but the cryptic may be simply the expression of more than can be seized at first sight by the ordinary mind. It may be that the ideas are not of a domain in which that mind is accustomed to move or that there is a new turn of expression other than the kind which it has been trained to follow. Again the ordinary turn of Bengali writing is lucid, direct, easy (in that it resembles French); if you bring into it a more intricate and suggestive manner in which the connections or transitions of thought are less obvious, that may create a difficulty. To which of these causes is the accusation of being cryptic due? Certainly not the first, since you are accused of having too adequate and not too inadequate a vocabulary. If it is any of the others, then the objection has no great force. A poet can be too easy to read, because there is not much in what he writes and it is exhausted at the first glance, or too difficult because you have to burrow for the meaning. But otherwise it makes no difference to the excellence of the work, if the reader can catch its burden at the first glance or has to dwell a little on it for the full force of it to come to the surface. One has perhaps sometimes to do the latter in your poems, but I do not find anything

unduly cryptic—certainly there is nothing that can be really called obscure. The feeling, the way of expression, the combinations of thought, word or image tend often to be new and unfamiliar, but that can be very well a strength and a merit, not an element of failure.

28-1-1933

Comments on Some Experiments in Metre

(1)

*THESE are things decided by the habit or training of the ear. The intervention of a dactylic (or, if you like, anapaestic) line followed by an Alexandrine

* This is in reply to the questions put by Arjava (J. A. Chadwick) in the following letter:

The wind hush comes, the varied colours westward stream:
Were they joy-tinted coral, or song-light seen-heard in a shell fitfully,
Drifted ashore by the hours as a waif from the day-wide sea
Of Loveliness that smites awake our sorrow-dream?
("Sundown")

Is there some way of keeping the loose swinging gait of anapaests within bounds? If one has used them freely in one or more lines, does it sound too abrupt to close with a strict iambic line—as in the final Alexandrine of the above?

would to the ear of a former generation have sounded abrupt and inadmissible. But, I suppose, it would not to an ear accustomed to the greater liberty—or even license—of latter-day movements.

I do not find that the rhythm of the first three lines is well-worn, though that of the first and third are familiar in type. The second seems to me not only not familiar, but unusual and very effective.

The canter of anapaests can, I suppose, be only relieved by variation or alternation with another metre, as you have done here—or by a very powerful music which would turn the canter into a torrent rush or an oceanic sweep or surge. But the proper medium for the latter up till now has been a large dactylic movement like the Greek or Latin hexameter; Swinburne has tried to get it into the anapaest, but with only occasional success because of

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It is perhaps a pity that the rhythm of the first three lines runs in such well-worn familiar channels. Is this intensified by the sing-song of the second line, which slipped into the Saturnian metre lengthened out by anapaests?

I was intending the third line to scan

Drifted ashore by the hours

But I see it could also be taken as four dactyls followed by the spondee "day-wide" and the monosyllabic foot "sea". Which is the scansion which you would prefer? And would the four dactyls make the earlier part of a passable hexameter, or would at least one spondee be needed to break up the monotony and too-obvious lilt?

his excessive facility and looseness, which makes the sound empty owing to want of spiritual substance. But this third line seems to be naturally dactylic and not anapaestic. Can one speak of catalectic and acatalectic hexameters? If so, this is a very beautiful catalectic hexameter.

I may say that the four lines seem to be in their variation very remarkably appropriate and effective, each exactly expressing by the rhythm the spirit and movement of the thing inwardly seen. I am speaking of each line by itself; the only objection that could be made is to the coming together of so many variations in so brief a whole (if it had been longer, I imagine it would not have mattered) as disturbing to the habit of the ear; but I am inclined to think that this objection would rest less on a reality than a prejudice. The habit of the ear is not fundamental, it can change. What is fundamental in the inner hearing is not, I think, disturbed by the swiftness of the change from the controlled flow of the first line to the wave dance and shimmer of the second, the rapid drift of the third and then the deliberate subtlety of the last line.

Is there in recent poetry an unconscious push towards a new metrical basis altogether for English poetry—shown by the outbreak of free verse, which fails because it is most often not verse at all—and the

seeking sometimes for irregularity, sometimes for greater plasticity of verse-movement? Originally, Anglo-Saxon verse depended, if I remember right, on alliteration and rhythm, not on measured feet; Greece and Rome through France and Italy imposed the foot measure on English; perhaps the hidden seeking for freedom, for elbow-room, for the possibility of a varied rhythmic expression necessitated by the complexity of the inner consciousness might find some vent in a measure which would depend not on feet but on lengths and stresses. I have sometimes thought that and it recurred to me while looking at your second line, for on that principle it might be read

> Were they joy-tinted coral, or song-light
>
> seen-heard in a shell fitfully.

One could imagine a measure made of lines in a given number of lengths like that and each length allowed a given number of stresses; there would be many combinations and variations possible. For example (not of good poetry, but of the form),

> A far sail on the unchangeable monotone of
>
> a slow slumbering sea,

A world of power hushed into symbols of hue,
silent unendingly,
Over its head, like a gold ball the sun tossed
by the gods in their play
Follows its curve,—a blazing eye of Time
watching the motionless day.

Perhaps it is only a curious imagination, too difficult and complex to realise, but it came on me strongly, so I put it down on paper.

***

I have written two more stanzas of the stress-scansion poem so as to complete it and send them to you. In this scansion as I conceive it, the lines may be analysed into feet, as you say all good rhythm can, but in that case the foot measures must be regarded as a quite subsidiary element without any fixed regularity—just as the (true) quantitative element is treated in ordinary verse. The whole indispensable structure of the lines depends upon stress and they must be read on a different principle from the current view—full value must be given to the true stresses and no fictitious stresses, no weight laid on naturally unstressed syllables

should be allowed—that is the most important point. Thus:

IN HORIS AETERNUM

A far sail on the unchangeable monotone of a
slow slumbering sea,
A world of power hushed into symbols of hue,
silent unendingly;
Over its head like a gold ball the sun tossed
by the gods in their play
Follows its curve,—a blazing eye of Time
watching the motionless day.

Here or otherwhere,—poised on the un-
reachable abrupt snow-solitary ascent
Earth aspiring lifts to the illimitable Light,
then ceases broken and spent,
Or in the glowing expanse, arid, fiery and
austere, of the desert's hungry soul,—
A breath, a cry, a glimmer from Eternity's
face, in a fragment the mystic Whole.

Moment-mere, yet with all eternity packed,
lone, fixed, intense,
Out of the ring of these hours that dance and
die, caught by the spirit in sense,

In the greatness of a man, in music's outspread wings, in a touch, in a smile, in a sound,
Something that waits, something that wanders and settles not, a once Nothing that was all and is found.

It is an experiment and I shall have to do more before I can be sure that I have caught the whole spirit or sense of this movement; nor do I mean to say that stress-scansion cannot be built on any other principle,—say, on one with more concessions to the old music or with less, breaking more away in the direction of free verse; but the essential, I think, is there.

19-4-1932

P.S. It is with some hesitation that I write "a once Nothing", because I am far from sure that the "once" does not overweight the rhythm and make the expression too difficult and compact; but on the other hand without it the sense appears ambiguous and incomplete,—for "a Nothing that was all" might be taken in a too metaphysical light and my object is not to thrust in a metaphysical subtlety but to express the burden of an experience.

In the final form I shall probably risk the ambiguity and reject the intruding "once".

(2)

I certainly think feet longer than the three syllable maximum can be brought in and ought to be. I do not see for instance why a foot like this ⌣⌣⌣—should not be as legitimate as the anapaest. Only, of course, if frequently used, they would mean the institution of another principle of harmony not provided for by the essentially melodic basis of English prosody in the past; as

> Interspersed/ in the immense / and unavai/ling
> void,/ winging their/ light through the/
> darkness in/ane./

Or,

> Interspersed/ in the immense/ and unavai/ling
> void,/ scattering/ their light through/ the
> darkness/ inane/.

I agree that this freedom would be more pressingly needed in longer metres than in short ones, but they need not be excluded from the short ones either.

(3)

I have to admit that I am beaten by your metre. I have written something, but I am afraid it is a fake. I will first produce the fake:

A gold moon / -raft floats / and swings / slowly
And it casts / a fire / of pale / holy / blue light
On the dra / gon tail / aglow / of the / faint night
That glim / mers far,—/ swimming,
The illu / mined shoals / of stars / skimming,
Overspread / ing earth / and drown / ing the/
heart in sight
With the / ocean-depths / and breadths / of the
Infinite.

That is the official scansion, and except in the last foot of the two last lines it professes to follow very closely the metre of N's poem. But in fact it is full of sins and the appearance is a counterfeit. In the first line the first foot is really an anti-bacchius: "A gold moon /-raft floats / . . . .", and quantitatively, though not accentually, the second is a spondee which also disturbs the true rhythmic movement. "Slowly" and "holy" are in truth trochees disguised as pyrrhics, and if "slowly" can pass off the deceit a little, "holy" is quite unholy in the brazenness of its pretences. If I could have got a

compound adjective like "god-holy", it would have been all right and saved the situation, but I could find none that was appropriate. The next three lines are, I think, on the true model and have an honest metre. But the closing cretic of my last two lines is nothing but a cowardly flight from the difficulty of the spondee. I console myself by remembering that even Hector ran when he found himself in difficulties with Achilles and that the Bhagavat lays down *palayanam* (flight) as one of the ordinary occupations of the Avatar. But the evasion is a fact and I am afraid it spoils the correspondence of the metres. I have some idea of adding a second stanza,—this one will look less guilty perhaps if it has a companion in sin—but if you wish to use this, you need not wait for the other as it may never take birth at all.

MOON OF TWO HEMISPHERES

A gold moon-raft floats and swings slowly
And it casts a fire of pale holy blue light
On the dragon tail aglow of the faint night
    That glimmers far, swimming,
The illumined shoals of stars skimming,
Overspreading earth and drowning the heart in
                                                                  sight
With the ocean-depths and breadths of the Infinite.

A gold moon-ship sails or drifts ever
In our spirit's skies and halts never, blue-keeled,
And it throws its white-blue fire on this grey field,
Night's dragon loop,—speeding,
The illumined star-thought sloops leading
To the Dawn, their harbour home, to the Light unsealed,
To the sun-face Infinite, the Untimed revealed.

(4)

Lines from "Ilion", an unfinished poem in English hexameter (quantitative):

Ida / rose with her / god-haunted / peaks || into / diamond / lustres, /
Ida, / first of the / hills, || with the / ranges / silent be / yond her /
Watching the / dawn in their / giant || com- panies, / as since the / ages /
First be / gan they had / watched her, || up / bearing / Time on their / summits. /

Triumph and agony changing hands in a desperate measure
Faced and turned, as a man and a maiden trampling the grasses
Face and turn and they laugh for their joy in the dance and each other.
These were gods and they trampled lives. But though Time is immortal,
Mortal his works are and ways and the anguish ends like the rapture.
Artisans satisfied now with their works in the plan of the transience,
Beautiful, wordless, august, the Olympians turned from the carnage.
Vast and unmoved they rose up mighty as eagles ascending,
Fanning the world with their wings. In the bliss of a sorrowless ether
Calm they reposed from their deeds and their hearts were inclined to the Stillness.
Less now the burden laid on our race by their star-white presence,
There was a respite from height; the winds breathed freer, delivered.
But their immortal content from the struggle titanic departed.
Vacant the noise of the battle roared like a sea on the shingles;

> Wearily hunted the spears their quarry, strength was disheartened;
>
> Silence increased with the march of the months on the tents of the leaguer.

The principle is a line of six feet, preponderantly dactylic, but anywhere the dactyl can be replaced by a spondee; but in English hexameter a trochee can be substituted, as the spondee comes in rarely in English rhythm. The line is divided by a caesura, and the variations of the caesura are essential to the harmony of the verse.

An example of Alcaics from the "Jivanmukta" (Alcaics is a Greek metre invented by the poet Alcaeus):

> There is/ a si/lence/ greater than/ any/ known/
>
> To earth's/ dumb spi/rit,/ motionless/ in the/ soul/
>
> That has/ become/ eter/nity's foot/hold,
>
> Touched by the/ infini/tudes for/ ever/.

In the Latin it is:

> –/–/⏑–/–/–⏑⏑/–⏑/–/
>
> –/–/⏑–/–/–⏑⏑/–⏑/–/
>
> –/–/⏑–/—/⏑–/–/
>
> –⏑⏑/–⏑⏑/–⏑/–⏑/

But in English, variations (modulations) are allowed, only one has to keep to the general plan.

Swinburne's Sapphics are to be scanned thus:

All the/ night sleep/ came not u/pon my/ eye-lid/,
Shed not/ dew, nor/ shook nor un/closed a/ feather/,
Yet with/ lips shut/ close and with/ eyes of/ iron
Stood and be/held me/.

Two trochees at the beginning, two trochees at the end, a dactyl separating the two trochaic parts of the line—that is the Sapphics in its first three lines, then a fourth line composed of a dactyl and a trochaic.

Nursery Rhymes and Popular Songs

The question you have put, as you put it, can admit of only one answer. I cannot agree that nursery rhymes or folk songs are entitled to take an important place or any place at all in the history of the prosody of the English language or that one should start the study of English metre by a careful examination of

the rhythm of "Humpty Dumpty", "Mary, Mary, quite contrary" or the tale of the old woman who lived in a shoe. There are many queer theories abroad nowadays in all the arts, but I doubt whether any English or French critic or prosodist would go so far as to dub "Who killed Cock Robin?" the true movement of English rhythm, putting aside Chaucer, Spenser, Pope or Shelley as too cultivated and accomplished or too much under foreign influence or to seek for his models in popular songs or the products of the *café chantant* in preference to Hugo or Musset or Verlaine.

But perhaps something else is meant—is it that one gets the crude indispensable elements of metre better from primitive, just-shaped or unshaped stuff than from more perfect work in which these are overlaid by artistic developments and subtle devices; an embryo or a skeleton is more instructive for the study of men than the developed flesh-and-blood structure? That may have a certain truth in some lines of scientific research, but it cannot stand in studying the technique of an art. At that rate one could be asked to go for the basic principles of musical sound to the jazz or even to the hurdy-gurdy and for the indispensable rules of line and colour to the pavement-artist or to the sign-board painter. Or perhaps the suggestion is that here one gets the primary unsophis-

ticated rhythms native to the language and free from the artificial movements of mere literature. Still, I can hardly fancy that the true native spirit or bent of English metre is to be sought or can be discovered in

> Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

and is lost in

> Rarely, rarely comest thou,
> Spirit of Delight.

Popular verse catches the child ear or the common ear much more easily than the music of developed poetry because it relies on a crude jingle or infantile lilt—not because it enshrines in its movements the true native spirit of the chant. I hold it to be a fallacy to think that the real spirit and native movement of a language can be caught only in crude and primitive forms and that it is disguised in the more perfect work in which it has developed its own possibilities to their full pitch, variety and scope. It is as if one maintained that the true note and fundamental nature of the evolving soul were to be sought in the earthworm or the scarabaeus and not

in the developed human being—or in the divinised man or Jivanmukta.

As for foreign influences, most of the elements of English prosody, rhyme, foot-scansion, line-lengths, stanza-forms and many others have come in from outside and have altered out of all recognition the original mould, but the spirit of the language found itself as much in these developments as in the first free alliterative verse—as much and more. The spirit of a language ought to be strong enough to assimilate any amount of imported elements or changes of structure and measure.

23-2-1933

Difference between a Song and a Poem

No, a song is not a kind of poem—or at least need not be. There are some very good songs which are not poems at all. In Europe, song-writers as such or the writers of the librettos of the great operas are not classed among poets. In Asia the attempt to combine song-quality with poetic value has been more common; in ancient Greece also lyric poetry was often composed with a view to being set to music. But still poetry and song-writing, though they can be

combined, are two different arts, because the aim and the principle of their building is not the same.

The difference is not that poetry has to be understood and music or singing has to be felt (*anubhuti*); that one has to reach the soul through the precise written sense and the other through the suggestion of sound and its appeal to some inner chord within us. If you only understand the intellectual content of a poem, its words and ideas, you have not really appreciated the poem at all, and a poem which contains only that and nothing else, is not true poetry. A true poem contains something more which has to be felt just as you feel music and that is its more important and essential part. Poetry has a rhythm, just as music has, though of a different kind, and it is the rhythm that helps this something else to come out through the medium of the words. The words by themselves do not carry it or cannot bring it out altogether and this is shown by the fact that the same words written in a different order and without rhythm or without the proper rhythm would not at all move or impress you in the same way. This something else is an inner content or suggestion, a soul-feeling or soul-experience, a life-feeling or life-experience, a mental emotion, vision or experience (not merely an idea), and it is only when you can catch this and reproduce some vibration of the

experience—if not the experience itself—in you that you have got what the poem can give you, not otherwise.

The real difference between a poem and a song is that a song is written with a view to be set to musical rhythm and a poem is written with the ear listening for the needed poetic rhythm or word-music. These two rhythms are quite different. That is why a poem cannot be set to music unless it has either been written with an eye to both kinds of rhythm or else happens to have (without especially intending it) a movement which makes it easy or at least possible to set it to music. This happens often with lyrical poetry, less often with other kinds. There is also this usual character of a song that it is satisfied to be very simple in its content, just bringing out an idea or feeling, and leaving it to the music to develop its unspoken values. Still this reticence is not always observed; the word claims for itself sometimes a larger importance.

4-7-1931

Sonnet and Satire

In a sonnet, thought should be set to thought, line added to line in a sort of architectural sequence, or

else there should be a progression like the pressing of waves to the shore, with the finality of arrival swift in a closing couplet or deliberate as in the Miltonic form.

As to your other proposition, I am not sure that satiric verse and the metaphysical lyrical can rightly be put together. Naturally, a great poetic genius could or might do it with success; but genius can do anything. Satire is more often than not a kind of half-poetry, because its inspiration comes primarily from the critical mind and a not very high part of it, not from the creative vision or moved intensity of poetic feeling. Creative vision or the moved intensity can come in to lift this motive but, except rarely, it does not lift it very high.

It is Dryden and Juvenal who have oftenest made something like genuine poetry out of satire, the first because he often changes satire into a vision of character and the play of psychological forces, the other because he writes not from a sense of the incongruous but from an emotion, from a strong poetic "indignation" against the things he sees around him. Aristophanes is a comic creator—like Shakespeare when he turns in that direction—the satire is only a strong line in his creation; that is a different kind of inspiration, not the ordinary satire. Pope attempted something creative in his *Rape of the Lock*, but

the success, if brilliant, is thin because the deeper creative founts and the kindlier sources of vision are not there.

SECTION FOUR

TRANSLATION OF POETRY

Two Ways of Translating Poetry

THERE is no question of defective poetry or lines. There are two ways of rendering a poem from one language into another—one is to keep strictly to the manner and turn of the original, the other to take its spirit, sense and imagery and reproduce them freely so as to suit the new language. A's poem is exceedingly succinct, simply-direct and compact in word, form, rhythm, yet full of suggestion—it would perhaps not be possible to do the same thing in Bengali; it is necessary to use an ampler form, and this is what you have done. Your translation is very beautiful; only, side by side with the original, one looks like a delicate miniature, the other like a rich enlargement. If you compare his

> Where is it calling
> The eyes of night

with the corresponding lines in your poem, you can see the difference. I did not mean to suggest that it was necessary to change anything.

11-7-1937

Freedom in Translation

A TRANSLATOR is not necessarily bound to the exact word and letter of the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it if he likes, and that is what is very often done. This is all the more legitimate since we find that literal translations more completely betray than those that are reasonably free—turning life into death and poetic power into poverty and flatness. It is not many who can carry over the spirit of a poem, the characteristic power of its expression and the turn of its rhythmical movement from one language to another, especially when the tongues in question are so alien in temperament to each other as English and Bengali. When that can be done, there is the perfect translation.

Literalness in Translation

THE proper rule about literalness in translation, I suppose, is that one should keep as close as possible to the original provided the result does not read like a translation but like an original poem in Bengali, and, as far as possible, as if it were the original poem originally written in Bengali.

I admit that I have not practised what I preached,—whenever I translated I was careless of the hurt feelings of the original text and transmogrified it without mercy into whatever my fancy chose. But that is a high and mighty criminality which one ought not to imitate. Latterly I have tried to be more moral in my ways, I don't know with what success. But anyhow it is a case of "Do what I preach and avoid what I practise."

10-10-1934

Importance of Turn of Language in Translation

I DO not think it is the ideas that make the distinction between European and Indian tongues—it is the turn of the language. By taking over the English turn of language into Bengali one may very well fail to produce the effect of the original because this turn will seem outlandish in the new tongue; but one can always, by giving a right turn of language more easily acceptable to the Bengali mind and ear, make the idea as natural and effective as in the original; or even if the idea is strange to the Bengali mind one can by the turn of language

acclimatise it, make it acceptable. The original thought in the passage you are translating may be reduced to something like this: "Here is all this beautiful world, the stars, the forest, the birds—I have not yet lived long enough to know them all or for them to know me so that there shall be friendship and familiarity between us and now I am thus untimely called away to die". That is a perfectly human feeling, quite as possible, more easily possible, to an Indian than to a European (witness Kalidas's *Sakuntala*) and can very well be acceptable. But the turn given it in English is abrupt and bold though quite forcible and going straight home—in Bengali it may sound strange and not go home. If so, you have to find a turn in Bengali for the idea which will be as forcible and direct; not here only but everywhere this should be the rule. Naturally, one should not go too far away from the original and say something quite different in substance but, subject to this limitation, any necessary freedom is quite admissible.

Difficulty of Catching Subtleties in Translation

It is not that I find the translations here satisfactory in the full sense of the word, but they are better

than I expected. There is none of them, not even the best, which I would pronounce to be quite the thing. But this "quite the thing" is so rare a *trouvaille*, it is as illusive as the capture of Eternity in the hours. As for catching the subtleties, the difficulty lies in one supreme faculty of the English language which none other I know possesses, the ease with which it finds the packed allusive turn, the suggestive unexpressed, the door opening on things ineffable. Bengali, like French, is very clear and luminous and living and expressive, but to such clear languages the expression of the inexpressible is not so easy—one has to go out of one's way to find it. Witness Mallarmé's wrestlings with the French language to find the symbolic expression—the right turn of speech for what is behind the veil. I think that even in these languages the power to find it with less effort must come; but meanwhile there is the difference.

Translation of Prose into Poetry

I THINK it is quite legitimate to translate poetic prose into poetry; I have done it myself when I translated *The Hero and the Nymph* on the ground that the beauty of Kalidas's prose is best

rendered by poetry in English, or at least that I found myself best able to render it in that way. Your critic's rule seems to me rather too positive; like all rules it may stand in principle in a majority of cases, but in the minority (which is the best part, for the less is often greater than the more) it need not stand at all. Pushed too far, it would mean that Homer and Virgil can be translated only in hexameters. Again what of the reverse cases—the many fine prose translations of poets so much better and more akin to the spirit of the original than any poetic version of them yet made? One need not go farther than Tagore's English version of his Gitanjali. If poetry can be translated so admirably (and therefore legitimately) into prose, why should not prose be translated legitimately (and admirably) into poetry? After all, rules are made more for the convenience of critics than as a binding law for creators.

Remarks on Bengali Translation of an English Poem

The poem you have chosen is not easily translatable. There is in it a union or rather fusion of high

severity of speech with exaltation and both with a pervading intense sweetness which it is almost impossible to transfer bodily without loss into another language. There is no word in excess, none that could have been added or changed without spoiling the expression, every word just the right revelatory one—no colour, no ornamentation, but a sort of suppressed burning glow, no similes, but images which have been fused inseparably into the substance of the thought and feeling—the thought itself perfectly developed, not idea added to idea at the will of the fancy but perfectly interrelated and linked together like the limbs of an organic body. This is high poetic style in its perfection and nothing of all that is translatable.

*Remarks on Bengali Translations of "Six Poems"**

YOUR translation of "Shiva" is a very beautiful poem, combining strength and elegance in the Virgilian manner. I have put one or two questions relating to the correctness of certain passages as a translation, but except for the care for exactitude it has not much importance.

* By Sri Aurobindo, Vide *Collected Poems and Plays,* Vol. II

A's translation pleased me on another ground—he has rendered with great fidelity and, as it seemed to me, with considerable directness, precision and force the thought and spiritual substance of the poem—he has rendered, of course in more mental terms than mine, exactly what I wanted to say. What might be called the 'mysticity' of the poem, the expression of spiritual vision in half-occult, half-revealing symbols is not successfully caught, but that is a thing which may very well be untranslatable; it depends on an imponderable element which can hardly help escaping or evaporating in the process of transportation from one language to another. What he has done seems to me very well done. Questions of diction or elegance are another matter.

There remains N's two translations of "Jivanmukta". I do not find the *Matravritta* one altogether satisfactory, but the other is a very good poem. But as a translation! Well, there are some errors of the sense which do not help, e.g., *mahima* for splendour; splendour is light. Silence, Light, Power, Ananda, these are the four pillars of the Jivanmukta consciousness. So too the all-seeing, flame-covered eye gets transmogrified into something else; but the worst is the divine stillness surrounding the world which is not at all what I either said or meant. The lines:

> Revealed it wakens, when God's stillness
> Heavens the ocean of moveless Nature

express an exact spiritual experience with a visible symbol which is not a mere ornamental metaphor but corresponds to exact and concrete spiritual experience, an immense oceanic expanse of Nature-consciousness (not the world) in oneself covered with the heavens of the Divine Stillness and itself rendered calm and motionless by that over-vaulting influence. Nothing of that appears in the translation; it is a vague mental statement with an ornamental metaphor.

I do not stress all that to find fault, but because it points to a difficulty which seems to me insuperable. This "Jivanmukta" is not merely a poem, but a transcript of a spiritual condition, one of the highest in the inner Overmind experience. To express it at all is not easy. If one writes only ideas about what it is or should be, there is failure. There must be something concrete, the form, the essential spiritual emotion of the state. The words chosen must be the right words in their proper place and each part of the statement in its place in an inevitable whole. Verbiage, flourishes there must be none. But how can all that be turned over into another language without upsetting the apple-cart? I

don't see how it can be easily avoided. For instance in the fourth stanza, "Possesses", "sealing", "grasp" are words of great importance for the sense. The feeling of possession by the Ananda rapture, the pressure of the ecstatic force sealing the love so that there can never again be division between the lover and the All-Beloved, the sense of the grasp of the All-Beautiful are things more than physically concrete to the experience ("grasp" is especially used because it is a violent, abrupt, physical word—it cannot be replaced by "in the hands" or "in the hold") and all that must have an adequate equivalent in the translation. But reading N's Bengali line I no longer know where I am, unless perhaps in a world of Vedantic abstractions where I never intended to go. So again what has N's translation of my line to do with the tremendous and beautiful experience of being ravished, thoughtless and wordless into the "breast" of the Eternal who is the All-Beautiful, All-Beloved?

That is what I meant when I wrote yesterday about the impossibility—and also what I apprehended when I qualified my assent to the proposal for translation with a condition.

3-6-1934

Remarks on Bengali Translation of a Poem of Shelley

Your translation of Shelley's poem is vulnerable in the head and the tail. In the head, because it seems to me that your words are open to the construction that human love is a rich and precious thing which the poet in question unfortunately does not possess and it is only because of this deplorable poverty that he offers the psychic devotion, less warm and rich and desirable, but still in its own way rare and valuable! I exaggerate perhaps, but, as your lines are open to a meaning of this kind, it tends to convey the very reverse of Shelley's intended significance. For in English "What men call love" is strongly depreciatory and can only mean something inferior, something that is poor and not rich, not truly love. Shelley says in substance: "Human vital love is a poor inferior thing, a counterfeit of true love, which I cannot offer to you. But there is a greater thing, a true psychic love, all worship and devotion, which men do not readily value, being led away by the vital glamour, but which the Heavens do not reject though it is offered from something so far below them, so maimed and ignorant and sorrow-vexed as the human consciousness which is to the divine consciousness as the moth is to the

star, as the night is to the day. And will you not accept this from me, you, who in your nature are kin to the Heavens, you, who seem to me to have something of the divine nature, to be something bright and happy and pure far above the sphere of our sorrow?" Of course all that is not said but only suggested, but it is obviously the spirit of the poem,—and it is this spirit in it that made me write to A the other day that it would be perhaps impossible to find in English literature a more perfect example of psychic inspiration than these eight lines you have translated....As to the tail, I doubt whether your last line brings out the sense of "something afar from the sphere of our sorrow". If I make these criticisms at all, it is because you have accustomed me to find in you a power of rendering the spirit and sense of your original while turning it into fine poetry in its new tongue which I would not expect or exact from any other translator.

11-7-1931

Shelley's Skylark—Imperfections of Great Poets —Essential Significance of Shelley's Poetry

I OBJECTED to your criticisms and cutting up of Shelley's "Skylark", because the whole of it seems to me to go from a wrong starting-point altogether. You seem to start with the assumption that the poem ought to be an intellectual whole with coherent parts, a logical structure. Your contention is that the main idea, consistent in other stanzas, is of a spiritual something, an incorporeal joy, and the stanzas you condemn as not consistent with the idea and tone of the rest come from an inferior and less bodiless inspiration and lower the level of the poem. Accordingly you propose to cut out these excrescences and insert some manipulations which would make the amended whole the perfect poem the "Skylark" should be.

I do not deny that from that standpoint your deductions are logical. The poem arranged as you want it, without these too earthly verses, would be a single ethereal impalpable shining tissue. It would be more subtly ethereal (not more spiritual), far from the earth, winging between the rainbow and the lightnings and ignorant of anything less brilliant and unearthly. Only it would be Shelley with something of himself left out, the "Skylark" incom-

plete with part of its fullness of tone vanished and a big hole in the middle—a beautiful poem, but no longer so worthy of its place among the few absolute English lyrics. That at least is what I feel. One thing more—even if these stanzas are an imperfection, I do not think it wise to meddle with them either by elimination or re-doing. To interfere with the imperfections of the great poets of the past is a hazardous business—their imperfections as well as their perfections are part of themselves. Imagine a drama of Shakespeare with all the blots scratched out and all the *scoriae* done over and smoothed to a perfect polish! It would be Shakespeare no longer. And this is Shelley whose strange and sweet and luminous magic of lyrical rhythm and language, when he is at his best and here he is at his best, in the impugned stanzas as well as in the others, is his own secret and no other shall ever recover it. To meddle here is substantially to mar. Things as great or greater in another kind may be done, but not with this unique and inevitable note. To omit, to change words or lines, to modify rhythms seems to me inadmissible.*

I do not altogether appreciate your references to Mrs. Shelley and the firefly and your cynical and

* The result is bound to be like Landor's rewriting of Milton—very good Landor but very bad Milton.

sarcastic picture of the "high-born maiden" as she appears to you—all that has nothing to do with Shelley's poetic conception which is alone relevent to the matter. I could draw a realistic picture of the poet "singing hymns unbidden" and unwanted and asking occasionally as he wrote whether dinner was ready—with hopes, but also with fears that he might not get it, his butcher's bill being unpaid for a long time. Or I might write scientifically about the real nature of sunset and sunrise and rainbow drops, etc. and ask what was the use of all this romantic flummery when there are real things to write about. Or I might quote the critic—I don't remember who he was—who said that Shelley certainly did not believe that the skylark was a spirit and not a bird and so the whole conception of the poem is false and insincere humbug and not true poetry because insincere. Such points of view are irrelevant. Shelley is not concerned with the real life of the high-born maiden or the poet any more than with the ornithology of the skylark or other material things. His glow-worm is something more than a material glow-worm. He is concerned with the soul love-laden, with the dreams of the poet, with the soul of beauty behind the glow-worm's light and the colour and fragrance of the rose. It is that he is feeling as linked with the essential some-

thing he has felt behind the song of the skylark. And because he so felt it he was not only entitled but bound to make place for it in his inspired lyrical theme.

I may observe in passing that the ethereal and impalpable are not more spiritual than the tangible and the concrete—they may seem more subtle and ideal to the idealising and abstracting mind, but that is a different affair. One can feel the spiritual through the embodied and concrete as well as through its opposite. But Shelley was not a spiritual poet and the "Skylark" is not a spiritual lyric. Shelley looked, it is true, always towards a light, a beauty, a truth behind the appearance of things but he never got through the idealising mind to the spiritual experience. What he did get was something of the purest emotional or aesthetic feeling or purest subtle mind-touch of an essence behind the appearance, an essence of ideal light, truth or beauty. It is that he expresses with a strange aerial magic or a curious supersensuously sensuous intensity in his finest lyrics. It is that we must seek in the "Skylark" and if we find it, we have no right to claim anything else. It is there all through and in abundance—it is its perfection that creates the sustained perfection of the poem. There is not and there ought not to be an intellectual sequence, a linked argument,

a logic structure. It is a sequence of feeling and of ideal perceptions with an occult logic of their own that sustains the lyric and makes it a faultless whole. In this sequence the verses you condemn have an indefeasible right of place. Shelley was not only a poet of other worlds, of "Epipsychidion" and of "The Witch of Atlas"; he was passionately interested in bringing the light, beauty and truth of the ideal super-world from which he came into the earth life —he tried to find it there wherever he could, he tried to infuse it wherever he missed it. The mental, the vital, the physical cannot be left out of the whole he saw in order to yield place only to the ethereal and impalpable. As he heard the skylark and felt the subtle essence of light and beauty in its song, he felt too the call of the same essence of light and beauty elsewhere and it is the things behind which he felt it that he compares to the skylark—the essence of ideal light and beauty behind things mental, the poet and his hymn, behind things vital, the soul of romantic love, behind things physical, the light of the glow-worm, the passionate intensity of the perfume of the rose. I cannot see an ordinary glow-worm in the lines of Shelley's stanza—it is a light from beyond finding expression in that glimmer and illumining the dell of dew and the secrecy of flowers and grass that is there. This

illumination of the earthly mind, vital, physical with his super-world light is a main part of Shelley —excise that and the whole of Shelley is no longer there, there is only the ineffectual angel beating his wings in the void—excise it from the "Skylark" and the true whole of the "Skylark" is no longer there.

18-11-1934

Difficulty of Translating Urdu Songs into English —Preference of Krishna to Rama

YOUR translations are very good, but much more poetic than the originals: some would consider that a fault, but I do not. The Urdu songs are very much in a manner and style that might be called the "hieratic primitive", like a picture all in intense line, but only two or three essential lines at a time; the colour is the hue of a single and very simple strong spiritual idea or experience. It is hardly possible to carry that over into modern poetry; the result would probably be, instead of the bare sincerity of the original, some kind of ostensible artificial artlessness that would not be at all the same thing.

I have no objection to your substituting Krishna for Rama, and if Kavir makes any, which is not likely, you have only to say to him softly, "Ram Shyam juda mat karobhai", and he will be silenced at once.

The bottom reason for your preference of Krishna to Rama is not sectarian but psychological. The Northerner prefers Rama because the Northerner is the mental, moral and social man in his type, and Rama is a congenial Avatar for that type; the Bengali, emotional and intuitive, finds all that very dry and plumps for Krishna. I suspect that is the whole mystery of the choice. Apart from these temperamental preferences and turning to essentials, one might say that Rama is the Divine accepting and glorifying a mould of the human mental, while Krishna seems rather to break the human moulds in order to create others from the higher planes; for he comes down direct from the Overmind and hammers with its forces on the mind and vital and heart of man to change and liberate and divinise them. At least that is one way of looking at their difference.

SECTION FIVE

MODERN POETRY

Contemporary English Poetry

(1)

I ADMIT I have not read as much of "modern" (contemporary) poetry as I should have—but the little I have is mostly of the same fundamental quality. It is very carefully written and versified, often *recherché* in thought and expression; it lacks only two things, the inspired phrase and inevitable word and the rhythm that keeps a poem for ever alive. Speech carefully studied and made as perfect as it can be without reaching to inspiration, verse as good as verse can be without rising to inspired rhythm—there seem to be an extraordinary number of poets writing like this in England now. ....It is not the irregular verses or rhymes that matter, one can make perfection out of irregularity —it is that they write their poetry from the cultured striving mind, not from the elemental soul-power within. Not a principle to accept or a method to imitate!

(2)

It is probably modern (contemporary) English poetry of which S is thinking. Here I am no expert; but I understand that the turn there is to suppress emotion, rhetoric, colouring, sentiment and arrive at something very direct, expressive, recording either the thing exactly as it is or some intimate essential truth of the thing without wrapping it up in ideas and sentiments, superfluous images and epithets. It does not look as if all contemporary English poetry was like that, it is only one strong trend; but such as it is, it has not as yet produced anything very decisive, great or successful. Much of it seems to be mere flat objectivity or, what is worse, an exaggerated emphatic objectivity; emotion seems often to be replaced by an intensified vital-physical sensation of the object. You will perhaps understand what I mean if you read the poem quoted on pages 316-17 of the "Parichaya"—"red pieces of day, hills made of blue and green paper, Satanic and blasé, a black goat lookingly wanders"—images expressing vividly an impression made on the nerves through the sight of the described objects. Admittedly it is—at least when pushed to such a degree—a new way of looking at things in poetry, but not essentially superior to

the impressions created on the heart and the mental imagination by the objects. All the same, there is behind, but still not successfully achieved, the possibility of a real advance, an attempt to get away from ornate mental constructions about things to the expression of the intimate truth of the things themselves as directly seen by a deeper sight within us. Only it seems to me a mistake to theorise that only by this kind of technique and in this particular way can what is aimed at be done.

(3)

Somebody said of modernist poetry that it could be understood only by the writer himself and appreciated by a few friends who pretended to understand it. That is because the ideas, images, symbols do not follow the line of the intellect, its logic or its intuitive connections, but are pushed out on the mind from some obscure subliminal depth or mist-hung shallow; they have connections of their own which are not those of the surface intelligence. One has to read them not with the intellect but with the solar plexus, try not to understand but feel the meaning. The surrealist poetry is the extreme of this kind—you remember our

surrealist B's question: "Why do you want poetry to have a meaning?" Of course you can put an intellectual explanation on the thing, but then you destroy its poetical appeal. Very great poetry can be written in that way from the subliminal depths, e.g. Mallarmé, but it needs a supreme power of expression, like Blake's or Mallarmé's, to make it truly powerful and convincing, and there must be sincerity of experience and significant rhythm.

2-8-1943

Latest Trend in English Poetry

The latest craze in England is either for intellectual quintessence or sensations of life, while any emotional and ideal element in poetry is considered as a deadly sin. But beautiful poetry remains beautiful poetry even if it is not in the current style. And after all, Yeats and AE are still there in spite of this new fashion of the last one or two decades.

Modern Art and Poetry

Not only are there no boundaries left in some arts (like poetry of the ultra-modern schools or painting) but no foundations and no Art either. I am referring to the modernist painters and to the extraordinary verbal jazz which is nowadays often put forward as poetry...

Modern Art opines that beauty is functional! that is, whatever serves its function or serves a true purpose is artistic and beautiful—for instance, if a clerk produces a neat copy of an official letter without mistakes, the clerk and his copy are both of them works of art and beautiful!..

March, 1935

Surrealist Poetry

(1)

I really can't tell you what surrealism is, because it is something—at least the word is—quite new and I have neither read the reliable theorists of the school nor much of their poetry. What I picked up

on the way was through reviews and quotations, the upshot being that it is a poetry based on the dream-consciousness, but I don't know if this is correct or merely an English critic's idea of it. The inclusion of Baudelaire and Valéry seems to indicate something wider than that. But the word is of quite recent origin and nobody spoke formerly of Baudelaire as a surrealist or even of Mallarmé. Mallarmé was supposed to be the founder of a new trend of poetry, impressionist and symbolist, followed in varying degrees and not by any means in the same way by Verlaine and Rimbaud, both of them poets of great fame. Verlaine is certainly a great poet and people now say Rimbaud also, but I have never come across his poetry except in extracts. This strain has developed in Valéry and other noted writers of today. It seems that all these are now claimed as part of or the origin of the surrealist movement. But I cannot say what are the exact boundaries or who comes in where. In any case, surrealism is part of an increasing attempt of the European mind to escape from the surface consciousness (in poetry as well as in painting and in thought) and grope after a deeper truth of things which is not on the surface. The dream-consciousness as it is called—meaning not merely what we see in dreams, but the inner consciousness in which

we get into contact with deeper worlds which underlie, influence and to some extent explain much in our lives, what the psychologists call the subliminal or the subconscient (the latter a very ambiguous phrase)—offers the first road of escape and the surrealists seem to be trying to force it. My impression is that there is much fumbling and that more often it is certain obscure and not always very safe layers that are tapped. That accounts for the note of diabolism that comes in in Baudelaire, in Rimbaud also, I believe, and in certain ugly elements in English surrealist poetry and painting. But this is only an impression.

N's poetry (what he writes now) is from the dream-consciousness, no doubt about that. My labelling him as surrealist is partly—though not altogether—a joke. How far it applies depends on what the real aim and theory of the surrealist school may be. Obscurity and unintelligibility are not the essence of any poetry and—except for unconscious or semi-conscious humorists like Dadaists—cannot be its aim or principle. True dream-poetry (let us call it so for the nonce) has and must always have a meaning and a coherence. But it may very well be obscure or seem meaningless to those who take their stand on the surface or "waking" mind and accept only its links and logic.

Dream-poetry is usually full of images, visions, symbols that seek to strike at things too deep for the ordinary means of expression. N does not deliberately make his poems obscure; he writes what comes through from the source he has tapped and does not interfere with its flow by his own mental volition. In many modernist poets there may be labour and a deliberate posturing, but it is not so in his case. I interpret his poems because he wants me to do it, but I have always told him that an intellectual rendering narrows the meaning—it has to be seen and felt, not thought out. Thinking it out may give a satisfaction and an appearance of mental logicality, but the deeper sense and sequence can only be apprehended by an inner sense. I myself do not try to find out the meaning of his poems, I try to feel what they mean in vision and experience and then render into mental terms. This is a special kind of poetry and has to be dealt with according to its kind and nature. There is a sequence, a logic, a design in them, but not one that can satisfy the more rigid law of the logical intelligence.

About Housman's theory: it is not merely an appeal to emotion that he posits as the test of pure poetry; he deliberately says that pure poetry does not bother about intellectual meaning at all, it is to the intellect nonsense. He says that the

interpretations of Blake's famous poems rather spoil them—they appeal better without being dissected in that way. His theory is questionable, but that is what it comes to; he is wrong in using the word "nonsense" and perhaps in speaking of pure and impure poetry. All the same, to Blake and to writers of the dream-consciousness, his rejection of the intellectual standard is quite applicable.

12-2-1937

(2)

About your points regarding surrealism:

(1) If the surrealist dream-experiences are flat, pointless or ugly, it must be because they penetrate only as far as the "subconscious" physical and "subconscious" vital dream layers which are the strata nearest to the surface. Dream-consciousness is a vast world in which there are a multitude of provinces and kingdoms, but ordinary dreamers for the most part penetrate consciously only to these first layers which belong to what may properly be called the subconscious belt. When they pass into deeper sleep regions, their recording surface dream-mind becomes unconscious and no longer

gives any transcript of what is seen and experienced there; or else in coming back these experiences of the deeper strata fade away and are quite forgotten before one reaches the waking state. But when there is a stronger dream-capacity, or the dream-state becomes more conscious, then one is aware of these deeper experiences and can bring back a transcript which is sometimes a clear record, sometimes a hieroglyph, but in either case possessed of a considerable interest and significance.

(2) It is only the subconscious belt that is chaotic in its dream sequences; for its transcriptions are fantastic and often mixed, combining a jumble of different elements: some play with impressions from the past, some translate outward touches pressing on the sleep-mind; most are fragments from successive dream experiences that are not really part of one connected experience—as if a gramophone record were to be made up of snatches of different songs all jumbled together. The vital dreams even in the subconscious range are often coherent in themselves and only seem incoherent to the waking intelligence because the logic and law of their sequences is different from the logic and law which the physical reason imposes on the incoherences of physical life. But if one gets the guiding clue and if one has some dream-experience and dream-insight,

then it is possible to seize the links of the sequences and make out the significance, often very profound or very striking, both of the detail and of the whole. Deeper in, we come to perfectly coherent dreams recording the experience of the inner vital and inner mental planes; there are also true psychic dreams—the latter usually are of a great beauty. Some of these mental or vital plane dream-experiences, however, are symbolic, very many in fact, and can only be understood if one is familiar with or gets the clue to the symbols.

(3) It depends on the nature of the dream. If they are of the right kind, they need no aid of imagination to be converted into poetry. If they are significant, imagination in the sense of a free use of mental invention might injure their truth and meaning—unless of course the imagination is of the nature of an inspired vision coming from the same plane and filling out or reconstructing the recorded experience so as to bring out the Truth held in it more fully than the dream transcript could do; for a dream record is usually compressed and often hastily selective.

(4) The word 'psyche' is used by most people to mean anything belonging to the inner mind, vital or physical, though the true psyche is different from these things. Poetry does come from these sources

or even from the superconscient sometimes; but it does not come usually through the form of dreams; it comes either through word-vision or through conscious vision and imagery whether in a fully waking or an inward-drawn state: the latter may go so far as to be a state of samadhi—*swapna samadhi*. In all these cases it is vision rather than dream that is the imaging power. Dreams also can be made a material for poetry; but everyone who dreams or has visions or has a flow of images cannot by that fact be a poet. To say that a predisposition and discipline are needed to bring them to light in the form of written words is merely a way of saying that it is not enough to be a dreamer, one must have the poetic faculty and some training—unless the surrealists mean by this statement something else than what the words naturally signify. What is possible, however, is that by going into the inner (what is usually called the subliminal) consciousness—this is not really subconscious but a veiled or occult consciousness—or getting somehow into contact with it, one not originally a poet can awake to poetic inspiration and power. No poetry can be written without access to some source of inspiration. Mere recording of dreams or images or even visions could never be sufficient, unless it is a poetic inspiration that records them with the

right use of words and rhythm bringing out their poetic substance. On the other hand, I am bound to admit that among the records of dream-experiences even from people unpractised in writing, I have met with a good many that read like a brilliant and colourful poetry which does hit—satisfying Housman's test—the solar plexus. So much I can concede to the surrealist theory; but if they say on that basis that all can with a little training turn themselves into poets—well, one needs a little more proof before one can accept so wide a statement.

13-2-1937

SECTION SIX

INDO-ENGLISH POETRY

Achievement of Indo-English Poetry—
Literary Decadence in Europe

THE idea that Indians cannot succeed in English poetry is very much in the air just now but it cannot be taken as absolutely valid. Toru Dutt and Romesh of the same ilk prove nothing; Toru Dutt was an accomplished verse-builder with a delicate talent and some outbreaks of genius and she wrote things that were attractive and sometimes something that had a strong energy of language and a rhythmic force. Romesh was a smart imitator of English poetry of the second or third rank. What he wrote, if written by an Englishman, might not have had even a temporary success. Sarojini is different. Her work has a real beauty, but it has for the most part only one highly lyrical note and a vein of riches that has been soon exhausted. Some of her lyrical work is likely, I think, to survive among the lasting things in English literature and by these, even if they are fine rather than great, she may take her rank among the immortals. I know no other Indian poets who have published in English anything that is really alive and strong

and original.* The test will be when something is done that is of real power and scope and gets its due chance. Tagore's Gitanjali is not in verse, but the place it has taken has some significance. For the obstacles from the other side are that the English mind is apt to look on poetry by an Indian as a curiosity, something exotic (whether it really is or not, the suggestion will be there), and to stress the distance at which the English temperament stands from the Indian temperament. But Tagore's Gitanjali is most un-English, yet it overcame this obstacle. For the poetry of spiritual experience, even if it has true poetic value, the difficulty might lie in the remoteness of the subject. But nowadays this difficulty is lessening with the increasing interest in the spiritual and the mystic. It is an age in which Donne, once condemned as a talented but fantastic weaver of extraordinary conceits, is being hailed as a great poet, and Blake lifted to a high eminence; even small poets with the mystic turn are being pulled out of their obscurity and held up to the light. At present many are turning to India for its sources of spirituality, but the eye has been directed only towards yoga and philosophy, not to the poetical

* This was written some years ago and does not apply to more recent work in English by Indian poets.

expression of it. When the full day comes, however, it may well be that this too will be discovered, and then an Indian who is at once a mystic and a true poet and able to write in English as if in his mother-tongue (that is essential) would have his full chance. Many barriers are breaking; moreover, both in French and English there are instances of foreigners who have taken their place as prose-writers or poets.

24-1-1935

P.S. About decadence: a language becomes decadent when the race decays, when life and soul go out and only the dry intellect and the tired senses remain. Europe is in imminent peril of decadence and all its literatures are attacked by this malady, though it is only beginning and energy is still there which may bring renewal. But the English language has still several strings to its bow and is not confined to an aged worn-out England. Moreover, there are two tendencies active in the modern mind, the over-intellectualised, over-sensualised decadent that makes for death, and the spiritual which may bring rebirth. At present the decadent tendency may be stronger, but the other is also there.

Future of Indo-English Poetry

WHAT you say may be correct (that our oriental luxury in poetry makes it unappealing to Westerners), but on the other hand it is possible that the mind of the future will be more international than it is now. In that case the expression of various temperaments in English poetry will have a chance.

If our aim is not success and personal fame but to arrive at the expression of spiritual truth and experience of all kinds in poetry, the English tongue is the most widespread and is capable of profound turns of mystic expression which make it admirably fitted for the purpose; if it could be used for the highest spiritual expression, that is worth trying.

Mental Theories and Poetic Freedom

WHY erect mental theories and suit your poetry to them? I would suggest to you not to be bound by any but to write as best suits your own inspiration and poetic genius. Each poet should write in the way suited to his own inspiration and substance; it is a habit of the human mind fond of erecting rules and rigidities to put one way forward as a general

law for all. If you insist on being rigidly simple and direct as a mental rule, you might spoil something of the subtlety of the expression you now have, even if the delicacy of the substance remained with you. Obscurity, artifice, rhetoric have to be avoided, but for the rest follow the inner movement.

I do not remember the precise words I used in laying down the rule to which you refer, I think I advised sincerity and straightforwardness as opposed to rhetoric and artifice. In any case it was far from my intention to impose any strict rule of bare simplicity and directness as a general law of poetic style. I was speaking of "Twentieth century English poetry" and of what was necessary for A, an Indian writing in the English tongue. English poetry in former times used inversions freely and had a law of its own—at that time natural and right, but the same thing nowadays sounds artificial and false. English has now acquired a richness and flexibility and power of many-sided suggestion which makes it unnecessary for poetry to depart from the ordinary style and form of the language. But there are other languages in which this is not yet true. Bengali is in its youth, in full process of growth and has many things not yet done, many powers and values it has still to acquire. It is necessary that its poets should keep a full and entire freedom to turn in

whatever way the genius leads, to find new forms and movements; if they like to adhere to the ordinary form of the language to which prose has to keep, they should be free to do so; but also they should be free to depart from it, if it is by doing so that they can best liberate their souls in speech. At present it is this that most matters.

Pitfalls of Indo-English Blank Verse

I HAVE often seen that Indians who write in English, immediately they try blank verse, begin to follow the Victorian model and especially a sort of pseudo-Tennysonian movement or structure which makes their work in this kind weak, flat and ineffective. The language inevitably suffers by the same fault, for with a weak verse-cadence it is impossible to find a strong or effective turn of language. But Victorian blank verse at its best is not strong or great, and at a more common level it is languid or crude or characterless. Except for a few poems, like Tennyson's early "Morte d'Arthur", "Ulysses" and one or two others or Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum", there is nothing of a very high order. Tennyson is a perilous model and can have a

weakening and corrupting influence and the "Princess" and "Idylls of the King" which seem to have set the tone for Indo-English blank verse are perhaps the worst choice possible for such a role. There is plenty of clever craftsmanship but it is mostly false and artificial and without true strength or inspired movement or poetic force—the right kind of blank verse for a Victorian drawing-room poetry, that is all that can be said for it. As for language and substance his influence tends to bring a thin artificial decorative prettiness or picturesqueness varied by an elaborate false simplicity and an attempt at a kind of brilliant, sometimes lusciously brilliant sentimental or sententious commonplace. The higher quality in his best work is not easily assimilable; the worst is catching but undesirable as a model.

Blank verse is the most difficult of all English metres; it has to be very skilfully and strongly done to make up for the absence of rhyme, and if not very well done, it is better not done at all. In the ancient languages rhyme was not needed, for they were written in quantitative metres which gave them the necessary support, but modern languages in their metrical forms need the help of rhyme. It is only a very masterly hand that can make blank verse an equally or even a more effective poetic

movement. You have to vary your metre by a skilful play of pauses or by an always changing distribution of caesura and of stresses and supple combinations of long and short vowels and by much weaving of vowel and consonant variation and assonance; or else, if you use a more regular form you have to give a great power and relief to the verse as did Marlowe at his best. If you do none of these things, if you write with effaced stresses, without relief and force or, if you do not succeed in producing harmonious variation in your rhythm, your blank verse becomes a monotonous vapid wash and no amount of mere thought-colour or image-colour can save it.

Practical Suggestions for Writing English Poetry

(1)

If you want to write English poetry which can stand, I would suggest three rules for you:

(1) Avoid rhetorical turns and artifices and the rhetorical tone generally. An English poet can use these things at will because he has the intrinsic sense of his language and can keep the right proportion

and measure. An Indian using them kills his poetry and produces a scholastic exercise.

(2) Write modern English. Avoid frequent inversions or turns of language that belong to the past poetic styles. Modern English poetry uses a straightforward order and a natural style, not different in vocabulary, syntax, etc., from that of prose. An inversion can be used sometimes, but it must be done deliberately and for a distinct and particular effect.

(3) For poetic effect rely wholly on the power of your substance, the magic of rhythm and the sincerity of your expression—if you can add subtlety so much the better, but not at the cost of sincerity and straightforwardness. Do not construct your poetry with the brain-mind, the mere intellect—that is not the source of true inspiration: write always from the inner heart of emotion and vision.

(2)

The poetry of your friend is rather irritating, because it is always just missing what it ought to achieve; one feels a considerable poetic possibility which does not produce work of some permanence because it is not scrupulous enough or has not a

true technique. The reasons for the failure can be felt, but are not easy to analyse. Among hem there is evidently the misfortune of having passed strongly under the influence of poets who smell of the schoolroom and the bookworm's closet. Such awful things as "unsoughten", "a-journeying," "a-knocking," "strayéd gift" and the constant abuse of the auxiliary verb "to do" would be enough to damn even the best poem. If he would rigorously modernise his language, one obstacle to real poetic success would perhaps disappear,—provided he does not, on the contrary, colloquialise it too much—e.g. "my dear", etc. But the other grave defect is that he is constantly composing out of his brain, while one feels that a pressure from a deeper source is there and might break through, if only he would let it. Of course, it is a foreign language he is writing and very few can do their poetic best in a learned medium; but still the defect is there.

22-6-1931

Requirements for Writing Good English

THIS book, returned herewith, is not in my opinion suitable for the purpose. The author wanted to

make it look like a translation of a romance in Sanskrit and he has therefore made the spirit and even partly the form of the language more Indian than English. It is not therefore useful for getting into the spirit of the English language. Indians have naturally in writing English a tendency to be too coloured, sometimes flowery, sometimes rhetorical and a book like this would increase the tendency. One ought to have in writing English a style which is at its base capable of going to the point, saying with a simple and energetic straightforwardness what one means to say, so that one can add grace of language without disturbing this basis. Arnold is a very good model for this purpose, Emerson less, but his book will also do.

It is surely better to write your own thoughts. The exercise of writing in your own words what another has said or written is a good exercise or test for accuracy, clear understanding of ideas, an observant intelligence but your object is, I suppose, to be able to understand English and express yourself in good English.

16-5-1932

Current Use of English Language

I AM in general agreement with your answer to M's strictures on certain points in your style and your use of the English language. His objections have usually some ground, but are not unquestionably valid; they would be so only if the English language were a fixed and unprogressive and invariable medium demanding a scrupulous correctness and purity and chaste exactness like the French; but this language is constantly changing and escaping from boundaries and previously fixed rules and its character and style, you might almost say, is whatever the writer likes to make it. Stephen Phillips once said of it in a libertine image that the English language is like a woman who will not love you unless you take liberties with her. As for the changeableness, it is obvious in recent violences of alteration, now fixed and recognised, such as the pronunciation of words like "nation" and "ration" which now sound as "gnashun" and "rashun"; one's soul and one's ear revolt, at least mine do, against degrading the noble word "nation" into the clipped indignity of the plebian and ignoble "gnashun", but there is no help for it. As for "aspire for", it may be less correct than "aspire to" or "aspire after", but it is psychologically called for and it

seems to me to be much more appropriate than "aspire at" which I would never think of using. The use of prepositions is one of the most debatable things, or at least one of the most frequently debated in the language. The Mother told me of her listening in Japan to interminable quarrels between Cousins and the American Hirsch on debatable points in the language but especially on this battlefield and never once could they agree. It is true that one was an Irish poet from Belfast and the other an American scholar and scientist, so perhaps neither could be taken as an unquestionable authority on the English tongue; but among Englishmen themselves I have known of such constant disputes. Cousins had remarkably independent ideas in these matters; he always insisted that "infinite" must be pronounced "infighnight" on the ground that "finite" was so pronounced and the negative could not presume to differ so unconscionably from the positive. That was after all as good a reason as that alleged for changing the pronunciation of "nation" and "ration" on the ground that as the 'a' in "national" and "rational" is short, it is illogical to use a different quantity in the substantive. "To contact" is a phrase that has established itself and it is futile to try to keep America at arm's length any longer; "global" also has established itself

and it is too useful and indeed indispensable to reject; there is no other word that can express exactly the same shade of meaning. I heard it first from Arjava who described the language of *Arya* as expressing a global thinking and I at once caught it up as the right and only word for certain things, for instance, the thinking in masses which is a frequent characteristic of the Overmind. As for the use of current French and Latin phrases, it may be condemned as objectionable on the same ground as the use of clichés and stock phrases in literary style, but they often hit the target more forcibly than any English equivalent and have a more lively effect on the mind of the reader. That may not justify a too frequent use of them, but in moderation it is at least a good excuse for it. I think the expression "bears around it a halo" has been or can be used and it is at least not worn out like the ordinary "wears a halo". One would more usually apply the expression "devoid of method" to an action or procedure than to a person, but the latter turn seems to me admissible. I do not think I need say anything in particular about other objections, they are questions of style and on that there can be different opinions; but you are right in altering the obviously mixed metaphor "in full cry", though I do not think any of your four substitutes have

anything of its liveliness and force. Colloquial expressions have, if rightly used, the advantage of giving point, flavour, alertness and I think in your use of them they do that; they can also lower and damage the style, but that danger is mostly when there is a set character of uniform dignity or elevation. The chief character of your style is rather a constant life and vividness and supple and ample abounding energy of thought and language which can soar or run or sweep along at will but does not simply walk or creep or saunter and in such a style forcible colloquialisms can do good service.

2-4-1947

SECTION SEVEN

APPRECIATION OF POETRY AND ART

Appreciation of Poetic Value

I DO not know why your correspondent puts so much value on general understanding and acceptance. Really it is only the few that can be trusted to discern the true value of things in poetry and art and if the "general" run accept, it is usually because acceptance is sooner or later imposed or induced in their minds by the authority of the few and afterwards by the verdict of Time. There are exceptions, of course, of a wide spontaneous acceptance because something that is really good happens to suit a taste or a demand in the general mind of the moment. Poetic and artistic value does not necessarily command mass understanding and acceptance.

Subjective Element in Criticism of Poetry and Art

ALL criticism of poetry is bound to have a strong subjective element and that is the source of the

violent differences in the appreciation of any given author by equally "eminent" critics. All is relative here, Art and Beauty also, and our view of things and our appreciation of them depends on the consciousness which views and appreciates. Some critics recognise this and go in frankly for a purely subjective criticism—"this is why I like this and disapprove of that, I give my own values." Most, however, want to fit their personal likes and dislikes to some standard of criticism which they conceive to be objective; this need of objectivity, of the support of some impersonal truth independent of our personality, is the main source of theories, canons, standards of art. But the theories, canons, standards themselves vary and are set up in one age only to be broken in another. Is there then no beauty of art independent of our varying mentalities? Is beauty a creation of our minds, a construction of our ideas and our senses, but not existent otherwise? In that case Beauty is non-existent in Nature, it is put upon Nature by our minds through *adhyaropa*. But this contradicts the fact that it is in response to an object and not independently of it that the idea of beautiful or not beautiful originally rises within us. Beauty does exist in what we see, but there are two aspects of it, essential beauty and the form it takes. "Eternal beauty wandering on her way"

does that wandering by a multitudinous variation of forms appealing to a multitudinous variation of consciousness. There comes in the difficulty. Each individual consciousness tries to seize the eternal beauty expressed in a form (here a particular poem or work of art), but is either assisted by the form or repelled by it, wholly attracted or wholly repelled, or partially attracted and partially repelled. There may be errors in the poet's or artist's transcription of beauty which mar the reception, but even these have different effects on different people. But the more radical divergences arise from the variation in the constitution of the mind and its difference of response. Moreover, there are minds, the majority indeed, who do not respond to "artistic" beauty at all—something inartistic appeals much more to what sense of beauty they have—or else they are not seeking beauty, but only vital pleasure.

A critic cannot escape altogether from these limitations. He can try to make himself catholic and objective and find the merit or special character of all he reads or sees in poetry and art, even when they do not evoke his strongest sympathy or deepest response. I have little temperamental sympathy for much of the work of Pope and Dryden, but I can see their extraordinary perfection or force in their own field, the masterly conciseness, energy,

point, metallic precision into which they cut their thought or their verse, and I can see too how that can with a little infusion of another quality be the basis of a really great poetic style, as Dryden himself has shown in his best work. But there my appreciation stops; I cannot rise to the heights of admiration of those who put them on a level with or on a higher level than Wordsworth, Keats or Shelley—I cannot escape from the feeling that their work, even though more consistently perfect within their limits and in their own manner (at least Pope's), was less great in poetic quality. These divergences rise from a conception of beauty and a feeling for beauty which belongs to the temperament. So too Housman's exaltation of Blake results directly from his feeling and peculiar conception of poetic beauty as an appeal to an inner sensation, an appeal marred and a beauty deflowered by bringing in a sharp coating or content of intellectual thought. But that I shall not discuss now. All this, however, does not mean that criticism is without any true use. The critic can help to open the mind to the kinds of beauty he himself sees and not only to discover but to appreciate at their full value certain elements that make them beautiful or give them what is most characteristic or unique in their peculiar beauty. Housman, for instance, may help many minds to see

in Blake something which they did not see before. They may not agree with him in his comparison of Blake and Shakespeare, but they can follow him to a certain extent and seize better that element in poetic beauty which he overstresses but makes at the same time more vividly visible.

Experience of Beauty

ALL things are creations of the Universal Consciousness, Beauty also. The "experience" of the individual is his response or his awakening to the beauty which the Universal Consciousness has placed in things; that beauty is not created by the individual consciousness. The philosophy of these lines is not at all clear. It says that the experience of beauty is a living truth added to beauty, a truth of which beauty is unaware. But if beauty is only the experience itself, then the experience constitutes beauty, it does not add anything to beauty; for such addition would only be possible if beauty already existed in itself apart from the experience. What is meant by saying that beauty is unaware of the experience which creates it? The passage makes sense only if we suppose it to mean that beauty is a reality

already existing apart from the experience but unconscious of itself, and the consciousness of experience is therefore a living truth added to the unconscious reality, something which brings into it consciousness and life.

6-1-1937

Contemporary Judgment of Poetry

If you send your poems to five different poets, you are likely to get five absolutely disparate and discordant estimates of them. A poet likes only the poetry that appeals to his own temperament or taste, the rest he condemns or ignores. (My own case is different, because I am not primarily a poet and have made in criticism a practice of appreciating everything that can be appreciated, as a catholic critic would.) Contemporary poetry, besides, seldom gets its right judgment from contemporary critics.

Nothing can be more futile than for a poet to write in expectation of contemporary fame or praise, however agreeable that may be, if it comes; but it is not of much value, for very poor poets have

enjoyed a great contemporary fame and very great poets have been neglected in their time. A poet has to go on his way, trying to gather hints from what people say for or against when their criticisms are things he can profit by, but not otherwise moved (if he can manage it)—seeking mainly to sharpen his own sense of self-criticism by the help of others. Difference of estimate need not surprise him at all.

Abiding Intuition of Poetic and Artistic Greatness

Yes, of course there is an intuition of greatness by which the great poet or artist is distinguished from those who are less great and these again from the not-great-at-all. But you are asking too much when you expect this intuition to work with a mechanical instantaneousness and universality so that all shall have the same opinion and give the same values. The greatness of Shakespeare, of Dante, of others of the same rank is unquestioned and unquestionable and the recognition of it has always been there in their own time and afterwards. Virgil and Horace stood out in their own day in the first rank among the poets and that verdict has never been reversed

since. The area of a poet's fame may vary; it may have been seen first by a few, then by many, then by all. At first there may be adverse critics and assailants, but these negative voices die away. Questionings may rise from time to time—e.g. as to whether Lucretius was not a greater poet than Virgil—but these are usually from individuals and the general verdict abides always. Even lesser poets retain their rank in spite of fluctuations of their fame. You speak of the discrediting of some and the rehabilitation of the discredited. That happened to Pope and Dryden. Keats and his contemporaries broke their canons and trampled over their corpses to reach romantic freedom; now there is a rehabilitation. But all this is something of an illusion —for mark that even at the worst Pope and Dryden retained a place among the great names of English literature. No controversy, no depreciation could take that away from them. This proves my contention that there is an abiding intuition of poetic and artistic greatness.

The attempts at comparison of poets like Blake and Shakespeare or Dante and Shakespeare by critics like Housman and Eliot? It seems to me that these are irrelevant and otiose. Both Dante and Shakespeare stand at the summit of poetic fame, but each with so different a way of genius that com-

parison is unprofitable. Shakespeare has powers that Dante cannot rival; Dante has heights which Shakespeare could not reach; but in essence they stand as mighty equals. As for Blake and Shakespeare, that opinion is more a personal fantasy than anything else. Purity and greatness are not the same thing; Blake's may be pure poetry in Housman's sense and Shakespeare's not except in a few passages; but nobody can contend that Blake's genius had the width and volume and richness of Shakespeare's. It can be said that Blake as a mystic poet achieved things beyond Shakespeare's measure—for Shakespeare had not the mystic's vision; but as a poet of the play of life Shakespeare is everywhere and Blake nowhere. These are tricks of language and idiosyncrasies of preference. One has to put each thing in its place without confusing issues and then one can see that Housman's praise of Blake may be justified but any exaltation of him by comparison with Shakespeare is not in accordance with the abiding intuition of these things which remains undisturbed by any individual verdict.

The errors of great poets in judging their contemporaries are personal freaks—they are failures in intuition due to the mind's temporary movements getting in the way of the intuition. The

errors of Goethe and Bankim were only an over-estimation of a genius or a talent that was new and therefore attractive at the time. Richardson's *Pamela* was after all the beginning of modern fiction. As I have said, the general intuition does not work at once and with a mechanical accuracy. Over-estimation of a contemporary is frequent, under-estimation also. But, taken on the whole, the real poet commands at first or fairly soon the verdict of the few whose eyes are open—and often the attacks of those whose eyes are shut—and the few grow in numbers till the general intuition affirms their verdict. There may be exceptions, for there is hardly a rule without exceptions, but this is, I think, generally true.

As for the verdict of Englishmen upon a French poet or *vice versa*, that is due to a difficulty in entering into the finer spirit and subtleties of a foreign language. It is difficult for a Frenchman to get a proper appreciation of Keats or Shelley or for an Englishman to judge Racine, for this reason. But a Frenchman like Maurois who knows English as an Englishman knows it, can get the full estimation of a poet like Shelley well enough. These variations must be allowed for; the human mind is not a perfect instrument, its best intuitions are veiled by irrelevant mental formations; but in these matters the truth

asserts itself and stands fairly firm and clear in essence through all changes of mental weather.

6-10-1934

Final Verdict on Creative Work

. . . . At any rate this is the only thing one can do, especially when one is attempting a new creation,— to go on with the work with such light and power as is given to you and leave the value of the work to be determined by the future. Contemporary judgments we know to be unreliable; there are only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time. The Roman proverb says, *securus judicat orbis terrarum*; but the world's verdict is secure only when it is confirmed by Time. For it is not the opinion of the general mass of men that finally decides, the decision is really imposed by the judgment of a minority and élite which is finally accepted and settles down as the verdict of posterity; in Tagore's phrase it is the universal man, *Viswa Manava*, or rather something universal using the general mind of man, we might say the Cosmic Self in the race, that fixes the value of its own works. In regard to the great names in literature this final

verdict seems to have in it something of the absolute, —so far as anything can be that in a temporal world of relativities in which the Absolute reserves itself hidden behind the veil of human ignorance. It is no use for some to contend that Virgil is a tame and elegant writer of a wearisome work in verse on agriculture and a tedious pseudo-epic written to imperial order and Lucretius the only really great poet in Latin literature or to depreciate Milton for his Latin English and inflated style and the largely uninteresting character of his two epics; the world either refuses to listen or there is a temporary effect, a brief fashion in literary criticism, but finally the world returns to its established verdict. Lesser reputations may fluctuate, but finally whatever has real value in its own kind settles itself and finds its just place in the durable judgment of the world. Work which was neglected and left aside like Blake's or at first admired with reservation and eclipsed like Donne's is singled out by a sudden glance of Time and its greatness recognised; or what seemed buried slowly emerges or re-emerges; all finally settles into its place. What was held as sovereign in its own time is rudely dethroned but afterwards recovers not its sovereign throne but its due position in the world's esteem; Pope is an example and Byron, who at once burst into a supreme glory and was the one English

poet after Shakespeare, admired all over Europe but is now depreciated, may also recover his proper place. Encouraged by such examples, let us hope that these violently adverse judgments may not be final and absolute and decide that the waste paper basket is not the proper place for *Savitri.* There may still be a place for a poetry which seeks to enlarge the field of poetic creation and find for the inner spiritual life of man and his now occult or mystical knowledge and experience of the whole hidden range of his and the world's being, not a corner and a limited expression such as it had in the past, but a wide space and as manifold and integral an expression of the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored as if kept apart under the direct gaze of the Infinite, as has been found in the past for man's surface and finite view and experience of himself and the material world in which he has lived striving to know himself and it as best as he can with a limited mind and senses. The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in a man's inner being but in his life and his works. Poetry also may have its share in that revolution and become part of the spiritual empire.

4-5-1947

Comparison of the Arts

I DO not know what to say on the subject you propose to me—the superiority of music to poetry—for my appreciation of music is bodiless and inexpressible, while about poetry I can write at ease with an expert knowledge. But is it necessary to fix a scale of greatness between two fine arts when each has its own greatness and can touch in its own way the extremes of aesthetic Ananda? Music, no doubt, goes nearest to the infinite and to the essence of things because it relies wholly on the ethereal vehicle, *Shabda*, (architecture by the by can do something of the same kind at the other extreme even in its imprisonment in mass); but painting and sculpture have their revenge by liberating visible form into ecstasy, while poetry though it cannot do with sound what music does, yet can make a many-stringed harmony, a sound revelation winging the creation by the word and setting afloat vivid suggestions of form and colour,—that gives it in a very subtle kind the power of all the arts. Who shall decide between such claims or be a judge between these godheads?

Poetry and Novel

No need to put poetry against novel and make a case between them. Both can be given admission to the spiritual Parnassus—but not all poetry and all novels. All depends on the consciousness from which the thing is done. If it is done from the psychic or the spiritual consciousness and bears the stamp of its source, that is sufficient. Of course there are certain things that cannot be done from there, but neither poetry nor fiction is in that case. They can be lifted to a higher level and made the expression of the psychic or spiritual mind and vision. When that is said, all is said. I hope my brevity has been of the right kind—and not left the question mystically obscure.

9-6-1936

Musical Excellence and General Culture

I HAVE not seen the remarks in question. I don't suppose all-round general culture has much to do with excelling in music. Music is a gift independent of any such thing and it can hardly be said that,

given a musical gift in two people, the one with an all-round culture would go farther than the other in musical excellence. That would not be true in any of the arts. But something else was meant, perhaps,—that there is a certain turn or element in the excellence which an all-round culture makes possible? It is only in that sense that it could be true. Shakespeare's poetry, for instance, is that of a man with a vivid and many-sided response to life; it gives the impression of a multifarious knowledge of things but it was a knowledge picked up from life as he went: Milton's gets a certain colour from his studies and learning; in neither case is the genius or the excellence of the poetry due to culture, but there is a certain turn or colouring in Milton which would have not been there otherwise and which is not there in Shakespeare. It does not give any superiority in poetic excellence to one over the other.

12-11-1936

Comment on Croce's Theory of Aesthetics

I HAVE not read Croce but it seems to me that Durant must have taken something of their depth out of them

in his presentation. At any rate, I cannot accept the proposition that there are only two forms of knowledge, imaginative and intellectual,—still less if these two are made to coincide with the division between knowledge of the individual and that of the universal and again with image-production and concepts. Art can be conceptual as well as imaginative—it may embody ideas and not merely produce images. I do not see the relevancy of the Da Vinci story*—one can sit motionless to summon up concepts as well as images or a concept and image together. Moreover, what is this intuition which is perfect sight and adequate imagination, that is production of an image,—is it empty of all "idea", of all conception? Evidently not,—for immediately it is said that the miracle of art lies in the conception of an idea. What then becomes of the division between the production of images and the production of concepts; and how can it be said that Art is ruled only by the image-producing power and images are its only wealth? All this seems to be very contradictory and confusing. You cannot cut up the human mind in that way—the attempt is that of the

* It is said that when Leonardo Da Vinci was painting the "Last Supper", he sorely displeased the Abbot who had ordered the work by sitting motionless for days before an untouched canvas.

analysing intellect which is always putting things as trenchantly divided and opposite. If it had been said that in Art the synthetic action of the idea is more prominent than the analytic idea which we find most prominent in logic and science and philosophical reasoning, then one could understand the statement. The integrating or direct integral conception and the image-making faculty are the two leading powers of Art with intuition as the driving force behind it—that too would be a statement that is intelligible.

Still more strange is the statement that the externalisation is outside the miracle of art and is not needed; beauty, he says, is adequate expression, but how can there be expression, an expressive image without externalisation? The inner image may be the thing to be expressed, it may itself be expressive of some truth but unless it is externalised how can the spectator contemplating beauty contemplate it at all or get into unity of vision with the artist who creates it? The difference between Shakespeare and ourselves lies only in the power of inwardly forming an image, not in the power of externalising it? But there are many people who have the power of a rich inner imaging of things, but are quite unable to put them down on paper or utter them in speech or transfer them to canvas or into clay or

bronze or stone. They are then as great creative artists as Shakespeare or Michael Angelo? I should have thought that Shakespeare's power of the word and Michael Angelo's of translating his image into visible form is at least an indispensable part of the art of expression, creation or image-making. I cannot conceive of a Shakespeare or Michael Angelo without that power—the one would be a mute inglorious Shakespeare and the other a rather helpless and ineffective Angelo.

19-12-1936

P.S. This is of course a comment on the statement as presented—I would have to read Croce myself in order to form a conception of what is behind his philosophy of Aesthetics.

SECTION EIGHT

POETIC CREATION AND YOGA—UTILITY OF LITERATURE, ETC. IN SADHANA

Reading and Poetic Creation and Yoga

A LITERARY man is one who loves literature and literary activities for their own separate sake. A Yogi who writes is not a literary man for he writes only what the inner Will and Word wants him to express. He is a channel and instrument of something greater than his own literary personality. Of course the literary man and the intellectual love reading—books are their mind's food. But writing is another matter. There are plenty of people who never write a word in the literary way but are enormous readers. One reads for ideas, for knowledge, for the stimulation of the mind by all that the world has thought or is thinking. I never read in order to create. As the Yoga increased, I read very little—for when all the ideas in the world come crowding from within or from above, there is not much need for gathering mental food from outside sources; at most a utility for keeping oneself informed of what is happening in the world,—but not as material for building up one's vision of the world and Truth and things. One becomes an

independent mind in communion with the cosmic Thinker.

Poetry, even perhaps all perfect expression of whatever kind, comes by inspiration, not by reading. Reading helps only to acquire for the instrument the full possession of a language or to get the technique of literary expression. Afterwards one develops ones own use of the language, ones own style, ones own technique. It is a decade or two that I have stopped all but the most casual reading but my power of poetic and perfect expression has increased tenfold. What I wrote with some difficulty, often with great difficulty, I now write with ease. I am supposed to be a philosopher, but I never studied philosophy—everything I wrote came from Yogic experience, knowledge and inspiration. So too my greater power over poetry and perfect expression was acquired in these last days not by reading and seeing how other people wrote, but from the heightening of my consciousness and the greater inspiration that came from the heightening.

Reading and painstaking labour are good for the literary man but even for him they are not the cause of his good writing, only an aid to it. The cause is within himself. As to 'natural', I don't know. Sometimes when the talent is inborn, and ready for expression, they can call it natural. Some-

times it awakes from within afterwards from a till then hidden nature.

11-9-1934

Poetic Creation and Yoga

I HAVE always told you that you ought not to stop your poetry and similar activities. It is a mistake to do so out of asceticism or *tapasya.* One can stop these things when they drop of themselves because one is full of experience and so interested in one's inner life that one has no energy to spare for the rest. Even then, there is no rule for giving up, for there is no reason why poetry, etc., should not be a part of sadhana. The love of applause, of fame, the ego-feeling have to be given up, but that can be done without giving up the activity itself.

What you write is perfectly true, that all human greatness and fame and achievement are nothing before the greatness of the Infinite and the Eternal. There are two possible deductions from that: first that all human action has to be renounced and one should go into a cave; the other is that one should grow out of ego so that the activities of the nature may become one day consciously an action of the

Infinite and Eternal. I myself never gave up poetry or other creative human activities out of *tapasya*; they fell into a subordinate position because the inner life became stronger and stronger slowly: nor did I really drop them, only I had so heavy a work laid upon me that I could not find time to go on. But it took me years and years to get the ego out of them or the vital absorption, but I never heard anybody say nor did it ever occur to me that that was a proof that I was not born for Yoga. You say I had made the mistake of my life in pronouncing you to be a "born Yogi"? I had not. I very explicitly based my remark on the personality that showed itself in your earlier experiences in a very vivid way which no one accustomed to the things of the Yoga or having any knowledge about them could fail to recognise. But I did not mean that there was nothing in you which was foreign to a "born Yogi". Everyone has many personalities in him and many of them are not Yogic at all in their propensities. But if one has the will to Yoga, the "born Yogi" prevails as soon as he gets a chance of manifesting himself through the crust of the mind and vital nature. Only, very often that takes time. One must be prepared to give the time.

Silence and Creative Activity

It would be a mistake to silence the poetic flow on principle; the creative habit is a tonic to the vital and keeps it in good condition and the practice of sadhana needs a strong and widening vital for its support. There is no real incompatibility between the creative power and silence; for the real silence is something inward and it does not or at least need not cease when a strong activity or expression rises to the surface.

Creation by The Word

The word is a sound expression of the idea. In the supra-physical plane when an idea has to be realised, one can by repeating the word-expression of it, produce vibrations which prepare the mind for the realisation of the idea. That is the principle of the *mantras* and of *japa*. One repeats the name of the Divine and the vibrations created in the consciousness prepare the realisation of the Divine. It is the same idea that is expressed in the Bible: "God said, Let there be Light, and there was Light". It is creation by the Word.

6-5-1933

Writing for The Divine

It is your aim to write from the Divine and for the Divine—you should then try to make all equally a pure transcription from the inner source and where the inspiration fails return upon your work so as to make the whole worthy of its origin and its object. All work done for the Divine, from poetry and art and music to carpentry or baking or sweeping a room, should be made perfect even in its smallest external detail as well as in the spirit in which it is done; for only then is it an altogether fit offering.

11-11-1931

Development of Mind and Sadhana

The development of the mind is a useful preliminary for the Sadhak; it can also be pursued along with the sadhana on condition that it is not given too big a place and does not interfere with the one important thing, the sadhana itself.

1933

Reading and Real Knowledge

Yes, the real knowledge comes of itself from within by the touch of the Divine. Reading can be only a momentary help to prepare the mind. But the real knowledge does not come by reading. Some preparation for the inner knowledge may be helpful —but the mind should not be too superficially active or seek to know only for curiosity's sake.

Spiritual Value of Poetry

It won't do to put excessive and sweeping constructions on what I write, otherwise it is easy to misunderstand its real significance. I said there was no reason why poetry of a spiritual character (not any poetry like Verlaine's or Swinburne's or Baudelaire's) should bring no realisation at all. This did not mean that poetry is a major means of realisation of the Divine. I did not say that it would lead us to the Divine or that anyone had achieved the Divine through poetry or that poetry by itself can lead us straight into the sanctuary. Obviously, if such exaggerations are put into my words, they become absurd and untenable.

My statement is perfectly clear and there is nothing in it against reason or common sense. The Word has power—even the ordinary written word has a power. If it is an inspired word it has still more power. What kind of power or power for what depends on the nature of the inspiration and the theme and the part of the being it touches. If it is the Word itself,—as in certain utterances of the great Scriptures, Veda, Upanishads, Gita, it may well have a power to awaken a spiritual and uplifting impulse even certain kinds of realisation. To say that it cannot contradicts spiritual experience.

The Vedic poets regarded their poetry as *Mantras*, they were the vehicles of their own realisations and could become vehicles of realisation for others. Naturally, these mostly would be illuminations, not the settled and permanent realisation that is the goal of Yoga—but they could be steps on the way or at least lights on the way. I have had in former times many illuminations, even initial realisations while meditating on verses of the Upanishads or the Gita. Anything that carries the Word, the Light in it, spoken or written, can light this fire within, open a sky, as it were, bring the effective vision of which the Word is the body. You yourself know that some of your poems deeply moved people who had the tendency towards spiritual things. Many

have got openings into realisation while reading passages of the "Arya"—which are not poetry, have not the power of spiritual poetry—but it shows all the more that the word is not without power even for the things of the spirit. In all ages spiritual seekers have expressed their aspirations or their experiences in poetry or inspired language and it has helped them and others. Therefore there is nothing absurd in my assigning to such poetry a spiritual or psychic value and effectiveness of a psychic or spiritual character.

Utility of Literature, etc. in Yoga

(1)

LITERATURE like anything else can be made an instrumentation for the Divine Life. It can be made of some spiritual importance if it is taken up with that aim and, even so, it cannot have that importance for everybody. In ordinary life no particular pursuit or study can be imposed as necessary for everybody; it cannot be positively necessary for everybody to have a mastery of English literature or to be a

reader of poetry or a scientist or acquainted with all the sciences (or encyclopaedia of knowledge). What is important is to have an instrument of knowledge that will apply itself accurately, calmly, perfectly to all that it has to handle.

(2)

Literature, poetry, science and other studies can be a preparation of the consciousness for life. When one does Yoga they can become part of the sadhana only if done for the Divine or taken up by the divine Force, but then one should not want to be a poet for the sake of being a poet only, or for fame, applause, etc.

April, 1935

(3)

This poetry, even if it does not lead to any realisation —though there is no reason why it should not, since it is not mundane,—is yet a link with the inner being and expresses its ideal. That is its value for the sadhana.

28-12-1934

Literature and Change of Nature

Good heavens! where did you get this idea that literature can transform people? Literary people are often the most impossible on the face of the earth.... Outer human nature can only change either by an intense psychic development or a strong and all-pervading influence from above. It is the inner being that has to change first—a change which is not always visible outside. That has nothing to do with the development of the faculties which is another side of the personality. That is another question altogether. But such sadhana means a slow laborious work of self-change in most cases, so why not sing on the way?

Novel-Reading in Sadhana

(1)

Reading novels is always distracting if you are deep in sadhana. It is better to avoid it now.

1933

(2)

If novels touch the lower vital or raise it, they ought not to be read by the sadhak. One can read them only if one can look at them from the literary point of view as a picture of human life and nature which one can observe, as the Yogi looks at life itself, without being involved in it or having any reaction.

28-3-1936

SECTION NINE

POETS—MYSTICS—INTELLECTUALS

The Poet and the Yogi

IT is quite natural for the poets to vaunt their *métier* as the highest reach of human capacity and themselves as the top of creation, it is also natural for the intellectuals to run down the Yogi or the Rishi who claims to reach a higher consciousness than that which they conceive to be the summit of human achievement. The poet lives still in the mind and is not yet a spiritual seer, but he represents to the human intellect the highest point of mental seership where the imagination tries to figure and embody in words its intuition of things, though that stands far below the vision of things that can be grasped only by spiritual experience. It is for that the poet is exalted as the real seer and prophet. There is too, helping the idea, the error of the modern or European mentality which so easily confuses the mentalised vital or life being with the soul and the idealising mind with spirituality. The poet imaging mental or physical beauty is for the outer mind something more spiritual than the seer or the God-lover experiencing the eternal peace or the ineffable

ecstasy. Yet the Rishi or Yogi can drink of a deeper draught of Beauty and Delight than the imagination of the poet at its highest can conceive. The Divine is Delight and it is not only the unseen Beauty that he can see but the visible and the tangible also has for him a face of the All-beautiful which the mind cannot discover.

The Poet and the Prophet

EVIDENTLY the poet's value lies in his poetic and not in his prophetic power. If he is a prophet also, the intrinsic worth of his prophecy lies in its own value, his poetic merit does not add to that, only it gives to its expression a power that perhaps it would not have otherwise.

Born Poet and Genius

A BORN poet is usually a genius, poetry with any power or beauty in it implies genius.

Genius and Yoga

I NEVER heard of anyone getting genius by effort. One can increase one's talent by training and labour, but genius is a gift of Nature. By sadhana it is different, one can do it; but that is not the fruit of effort, but either of an inflow or by an opening or liberation of some impersonal power or manifestation of unmanifested power. No rule can be made of such things; it depends on persons and circumstances how far the manifestation of genius by Yoga will go or what shape it will take or to what degree or height it will rise.

28-7-1938

Classification of the World's Greatest Poets

(1)

I SUPPOSE all the names you mention can be included among the world's supreme singers; or if you like you can put them all in three rows—e.g:

First row —Homer, Shakespeare, Valmiki.

Second row —Dante, Kalidasa, Aeschylus, Virgil,
Milton.
Third row —Goethe.

And there you are! To speak less flippantly, the first three have at once supreme imaginative originality, supreme poetic gift, widest scope and supreme creative genius. Each is a sort of poetic demiurge who has created a world of his own. Dante's triple world beyond is more constructed by the poetic seeing mind than by this kind of elemental demiurgic power—otherwise he would rank by their side; the same with Kalidasa. Aeschylus is a seer and creator but on a much smaller scale. Virgil and Milton have a less spontaneous breath of creative genius; one or two typal figures excepted, they live rather by what they have said than by what they have made.

31-3-1932

(2)

I am not prepared to classify all the poets in the universe—it was the front bench or benches you asked for. By 'others' I meant poets like Lucretius, Euripides, Calderon, Corneille, Hugo. Euripides (*Medea*, *Bacchae* and other plays) is a greater poet

than Racine whom you want to put in the first rank. If you want only the very greatest, none of these can enter—only Vyasa and Sophocles. Vyasa could very well claim a place beside Valmiki, Sophocles beside Aeschylus. The rest, if you like, you can send to the third row, but it is something of a promotion about which one can feel some qualms. Spenser too, if you like; it is difficult to draw a line.

Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth have not been brought into consideration although their best work is as fine poetry as any written, but they have written nothing on a larger scale which would place them among the greatest creators. If Keats had finished Hyperion (without spoiling it), if Shelley had lived, or if Wordsworth had not petered out like a motor car with insufficient petrol, it might be different, but we have to take things as they are. As it is, all began magnificently, but none of them finished, and what work they did, except a few lyrics, sonnets, short pieces and narratives, is often flawed and unequal. If they had to be admitted, what about at least fifty others in Europe and Asia?

The critical opinions you quote* are, many of them, flagrantly prejudiced and personal. The only thing

*A had asked: "Saintsbury as good as declares that poetry is Shelley and Shelley poetry—Spenser alone, to his mind, can contest the right

that results from Aldous Huxley's opinion, shared by many but with less courage, is that Spenser's melodiousness cloyed upon Aldous Huxley and that perhaps points to a serious defect somewhere in Spenser's art or in his genius but this does not cancel the poetic value of Spenser. Swinburne and Arnold are equally unbalanced on either side of their see-saw about Hugo. He might be described as a great but imperfect genius, who just missed the very first rank because his word sometimes exceeded his weight, because his height was at the best considerable, even magnificent, but his depth insufficient and especially because he was often

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to that equation. (Shakespeare, of course, is admittedly *hors concours.*) Aldous Huxley abominates Spenser; the fellow has got nothing to say and says it with a consummately cloying melodiousness! Swinburne, as is well known, could never think of Victor Hugo without bursting into half a dozen alliterative superlatives, while Matthew Arnold it was, I believe, who pitied Hugo for imagining that poetry consisted in using 'divinité', 'éternité', 'infinité', as lavishly as possible. And then there is Keats, whose *Hyperion* compelled even the sneering Byron to forget his usual condescending attitude towards 'Johnny' and confess that nothing grander had been seen since Aeschylus. Racine, too, cannot be left out—can he? Voltaire adored him, Voltaire who called Shakespeare a drunken barbarian. Finally, what of Wordsworth, whose Immortality Ode was hailed by Mark Pattison as the *ne plus ultra* of English poetry since the days of *Lycidas*?

Kindly shed the light of infallible *viveka* on this chaos of jostling opinions."

too oratorical to be quite sincere. The remarks of Voltaire and Mark Pattison go into the same basket.

2-4-1932

Goethe and Shakespeare ; Homer, Vyasa and Valmiki

Yes, Goethe goes much deeper than Shakespeare; he had an incomparably greater intellect than the English Poet and sounded problems of life and thought Shakespeare had no means of approaching even. But he was certainly not a greater poet; I do not find myself very ready to admit either that he was Shakespeare's equal. He wrote out of a high poetic intelligence but his style and movement nowhere came near the poetic power, the magic, the sovereign expression and profound or subtle rhythms of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a supreme poet and one might almost say, nothing else; Goethe was by far the greater man and the greater brain, but he was a poet by choice, his mind's choice among its many high and effulgent possibilities, rather than by the very necessity of his being. He wrote his poetry as he did everything else with a great skill and an inspired subtlety of language,

and effective genius but it was only part of his genius and not the whole. There is too a touch mostly wanting—the touch of an absolute, an intensely inspired or revealing inevitability; few quite supreme poets have that in abundance, in others it comes by occasional jets or flashes.

When I said there were no greater poets than Homer and Shakespeare, I was thinking of their essential force and beauty—not of the scope of their work as a whole; for there are poets greater in their range. The Mahabharata is from that point of view a far greater creation than the Iliad, the Ramayana than the Odyssey, and spread, either and both of them, their strength and their achievement over a larger field than the whole dramatic world of Shakespeare; both are built on an almost cosmic vastness of plan and take all human life (the Mahabharata all human thought as well) in their scope and touch too on things which the Greek and Elizabethan poets could not even glimpse. But as poets—as masters of rhythm and language and the expression of poetic beauty—Vyasa and Valmiki though not inferior, are not greater than either the English or the Greek poet. We leave aside for the moment the question whether the Mahabharata was not the creation of the mind of a people rather than of a single poet, for that doubt has been raised also with regard to Homer.

Importance of the Power of Poetic Expression

ALL depends on the power of expression of the poet. A poet like Shakespeare or Shelley or Wordsworth though without spiritual experience may in an inspired moment become the medium of an expression of spiritual Truth which is beyond him and the expression, as it is not that of his own mind, may be very powerful and living, not merely aesthetically agreeable. On the other hand a poet with spiritual experience may be hampered by his medium or by his transcribing brain or by an insufficient mastery of language and rhythm and give an expression which may mean much to him but not convey the power and breath of it to others. The English poets of the 17th century often used a too intellectual mode of expression for their poetry to be a means of living communication to others except in rare moments of an unusual vision and inspiration; it is these that give their work its value.

Blake

(1)

BLAKE stands out among the mystic poets of Europe. His occasional obscurity,—he is more often in his

best poems lucid and crystal clear,—is due to his writing of things that are not familiar to the physical mind and writing them with fidelity instead of accomodating them to the latter.... In reading such writing the inner being has to feel first, then only the mind can catch what is behind.

(2)

I did not mean that he never altered—I don't know about that. I meant he did not let his mind disfigure what came by trying to make it intellectual. He transcribed what he saw and heard.

Yeats and AE

YES, simplicity is always a sound basis for poetic style. Even if one has to be complex, subtle or ornate by necessity of the inspiration, the basic habit of simplicity gives a greater note of genuineness and power to it.

I do not think I have been unduly enthusiastic over Yeats, but one must recognise his great artistry in language and verse in which he is far superior

to AE—just as AE as a man and a seer was far superior to Yeats. Yeats never got beyond a beautiful mid-world of the vital *Antariksha*, he has not penetrated beyond to spiritual-mental heights as AE did. But all the same, when one speaks of poetry, it is the poetical element to which one must give the most importance. What Yeats expressed he expressed with great poetical beauty, perfection and power and he has, besides, a creative imagination. AE had an unequal profundity of vision and power and range in the spiritual and psychic field. AE's thought and way of seeing and saying things is much more sympathetic to me than Yeats' who only touches a brilliant floating skirt-edge of the truth of things—but I cannot allow that to influence me when I have to judge of the poetic side of their respective achievements.... The depths of AE are greater than those of Yeats, assuredly. His suggestiveness must therefore be profounder. In this poem (AE's poem entitled *Sibyil*) which you have translated very beautifully, his power of expression, always penetrating, simple and direct, is at its best and his best can be miraculously perfect.

Of course when you are writing poems or composing you are in contact with your inner being, that is why you feel so different then. The whole art of yoga is to get that contact and to get from it into

the inner being itself, for so one can enter directly into and remain in all that is great and luminous and beautiful. Then one can try to establish them in this troublesome and defective outer shell of oneself and in the outer world also.

August, 1934

Yeats and the Occult

(1)

It is certainly a very beautiful passage* and has obviously a mystic significance; but I don't know

* Dectora: No. Take this sword
And cut the rope, for I go on with Forgael.
........The sword is in the rope—
The rope's in two—it falls into the sea,
It whirls into the foam. O ancient worm,
Dragon that loved the world and held us to it,
You are broken, you are broken. The world drifts away,
And I am left alone with my beloved,
Who cannot put me from his sight for ever.
We are alone for ever, and I laugh,
Forgael, because you cannot put me from you.
The mist has covered the heavens, and you and I
Shall be alone for ever. We two—this crown—
I half remember. It has been in my dreams.
Bend lower, O king, that I may crown you with it.

whether we can put into it such precise meaning as you suggest. Yeats' contact, unlike AE's, is not so much with the sheer spiritual Truth as with the hidden intermediate regions, from the faery worlds to certain worlds of larger mind and life. What he has seen there he is able to clothe rather than embody in strangely beautiful and suggestive forms, dreams and symbols. I have read some of his poems which touch these behind-worlds with as much actuality as an ordinary poet would achieve in dealing with physical life—this is not surprising in a Celtic poet, for the race has the key to the occult worlds or some of them at least—but this strange force of suggestive mystic life is not accom-

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O flower of the branch, O bird among the leaves,
O silver fish that my two hands have taken
Out of the running stream, O morning star,
Trembling in the blue heavens like a white fawn
Upon the misty border of the wood,
Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair,
For we will gaze upon this world no longer.

Forgael (gathering Dectora's hair about him):
Beloved, having dragged the net about us,
And knitted mesh to mesh, we grow immortal;
And that old harp awakens of itself
To cry aloud to the grey birds, and dreams,
That have had dreams for father, live in us.

(End of Yeats' *The Shadowy Waters*)

panied by a mental precision which would enable us to say, it is this or that his figures symbolise. If we could say it, it might take away something of that glowing air in which his symbols stand out with such a strange unphysical reality. The perception, feeling, sight of Yeats in this kind of poetry are remarkable, but his mental conception often veils itself in a shimmering light—it has then strong vistas but no strong contours.

(2)

The perfection here of Yeats' poetic expression of things occult is due to this that at no point has the mere intellectual or thinking mind interfered—it is a piece of pure vision, a direct sense, almost sensation of the occult, a light not of earth flowing through without anything to stop it or to change it into a product of the terrestrial mind. When one writes from pure occult vision there is this perfection and direct sense though it may be of different kinds, for the occult world of one is not that of another. But when there is the intervention of the intellectual mind in a poem this intervention may produce good lines of another power, but will not coincide in tone with what is before them or

after—there is an alternation of the subtler occult and the heavier intellectual notes and the purity of vision becomes blurred by the intrusion of the earth-mind into a seeing which is beyond our earth-nature.

But these observations are valid only if the object is, as in Yeats' lines, to bring out a veridical and flawless transcript of the vision and atmosphere of faeryland. If the object is rather to create symbol-links between the seen and the unseen and convey the significance of the mediating figures, there is no obligation to avoid the aid of the intellectualising note. Only, a harmony and fusion has to be effected between the two elements, the light and beauty of the beyond and the less remote power and interpretative force of the intellectual thought-links. Yeats does that too, very often, but he does it by bathing his thought also in the faery light; in the lines quoted (from *The Stolen Child* and *The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland*), however, he does not do that, but leaves the images of the other world shimmering in their own native hue of mystery. There is not the same beauty and intense atmosphere when a poem is made up of alternating notes. The finest lines of these poems are those in which the other-light breaks out most fully—but there are others also which are very fine too in their quality and execution.

D. H. Lawrence

(1)

I HAVE not read anything of Lawrence, but I have recently seen indications about him from many quarters; the impression given was that of a man of gifts who failed for want of vital balance like so many others. The prose you have turned into verse —very well, as usual—has certainly quality, though there is not enough to form a definite judgment. A seeker who missed the issue, I should imagine— misled by the vitalistic stress to which the mind of today is a very harassed captive.

(2)

Lawrence had the psychic push inside towards the Unknown and Beyond at the same time as a push towards the vital life which came in its way. He was trying to find his way between the two and mixed them up together till at the end he got his mental liberation from the tangle though not yet any clear knowledge of the way—for that, I suppose, he will have to be born nearer the East or in any case in surroundings which will enable him to get at the Light.

D. H. Lawrence and Modern Poetry

(1)

I SUPPOSE Lawrence was a Yogi who had missed his way and come into a European body to work out his difficulties. "To lapse back into darkness and unknowing" sounds like the Christian mystic's passage into the "night of God", but I think Lawrence thought of a new efflorescence from the subconscient while the mystic's "night of God" was a stage between ordinary consciousness and the Superconscient Light.

The passage you have quoted certainly shows that Lawrence had an idea of the new spiritual birth. What he has written there could be a very accurate indication of the process of the change, the putting away of the old mind, vital, physical consciousness and the emergence of a new consciousness from the now invisible Within, not an illusory periphery like the present mental, vital, physical ignorance but a truth-becoming from the true being within us. He speaks of the transition as a darkness created by the rejection of the outer mental light, a darkness intervening before the true light from the Invisible can come. Certain Christian mystics have said the same thing and the

Upanishad also speaks of the luminous Being beyond the darkness. But in India the rejection of the mental light, the vital stir, the physical hard narrow concreteness leads more often not to a darkness but to a wide emptiness and silence which begins afterwards to fill with the light of a deeper, greater, truer consciousness, a consciousness full of peace, harmony, joy and freedom. I think Lawrence was held back from realising because he was seeking for the new birth in the subconscient vital and taking that for the Invisible Within—he mistook Life for Spirit, whereas Life can only be an expression of the Spirit. That too perhaps was the reason for his preoccupation with a vain and baffled sexuality.

His appreciation of the Ajanta paintings must have been due to the same drive that made him seek for a new poetry as well as a new truth from within. He wanted to get rid of the outward forms that for him hide the Invisible and arrive at something that would express with bare simplicity and directness some reality within. It is what made people begin to prefer the primitives to the developed art of the Renaissance. That is why he depreciates Botticelli as not giving the real thing, but only an outward grace and beauty which he considers vulgar in comparison with the less formal art of old that was satisfied with bringing out the pure emotion from

within and nothing else. It is the same thing which makes him want a stark bare rocky directness for modern poetry.

To continue about Lawrence's poetry from where I stopped. The idea is to get rid of all over-expression, of language for the sake of language, or form for the sake of form, even of indulgence of poetic emotion for the sake of the emotion, because all that veils the thing in itself, dresses it up, prevents it from coming out in the seizing nudity of its truth, the power of its intrinsic appeal. There is a sort of mysticism here that wants to express the inexpressible, the concealed, the invisible. Reduce expression to its barest bareness and you get nearer the inexpressible; suppress as much of the form as may be and you get nearer that behind, which is invisible. It is the same impulse as pervaded recent endeavours in Art. Form hides, not expresses the reality; let us suppress the concealing form and express the reality by its appropriate geometrical figures—and you have cubism. Or since that is too much, suppress exactitude of form and replace it by more significant forms that indicate rather than conceal the truth—so you have "abstract" paintings. Or, what is within reveals itself in dreams, not in waking phenomena, let us have in poetry or painting the figures, visions, sequences, designs of Dream—and

you have surrealist art and poetry. The idea of Lawrence is akin: let us get rid of rhyme, metre, artifices which please us for their own sake and draw us away from the thing in itself, the real behind the form. So suppressing these things let us have something bare, rocky, primally expressive. There is nothing to find fault with in the theory provided it does lead to a new creation which expresses the inner truth in things better and more vividly and directly than with its rhyme and metre the old poetry, now condemned as artificial and rhetorical, succeeded in expressing it. But the results do not come up to expectation. Take the four lines of Lawrence*: in what do they differ from the old poetry except in having a less sure rhythmical movement, a less seizing perfection of language? It is a fine image and Keats or Thompson would have made out of it something unforgettable. But after reading these lines one has a difficulty in recalling any clear outline of image, any seizing expression, any rhythmic cadence that goes on reverberating within and preserves the vision forever. What the modernist metreless verse does is to catch up the move-

* Just a few of the roses gathered by the Isar
Are fallen, and their blood-red petals on the cloth
Float like boats on a river, waiting
For a fairy wind to wake them from their sloth.

ments of prose and try to fit them into varying lengths and variously arranged lengths of verse. Sometimes something which has its own beauty or power is done —though nothing better or even equal to the best that was done before, but for the most there is either an easy or a strained ineffectiveness. No footsteps hitting the earth! Footsteps on earth can be a walk, can be prose: the beats of poetry can, on the contrary, be a beat of wings. As for the bird image, well, there is more lapsing than flying in this movement. But where is the bareness, the rocky directness—where is the something more real than any play of outer form can give? The attempt at colour, image, expression is just the same as in the old poetry—whatever is new and deep comes from Lawrence's peculiar vision, but could have been more powerfully expressed in a closer-knit language and metre.

Of course, it does not follow that new and free forms are not to be attempted or that they cannot succeed at all. But if they succeed it will be by bringing the fundamental quality, power, movement of the old poetry—which is the eternal quality of all poetry—into new metrical and rhythmical discoveries and new secrets of poetic expression. It cannot be done by reducing these to skeletonic bareness or suppressing them by subdual and

dilution in a vain attempt to unite the free looseness of prose with the gathered and intent paces of poetry.

(2)

What I have written about modern poetry is too slight and passing and general a comment, such as one can hazard in a private letter; but for a criticism that has to see the light of day something more ample and sufficient would be necessary. Lawrence's poetry, whatever one may think of his theory or technique, has too much importance and significance to be lightly handled and the modernism of contemporary poetry is a *fait accompli*. One can refuse to recognise or legitimatise the *fait accompli*, whether in Abyssinia or in the realms of literature, but it is too solid to be met with a mere condemnation in principle.

Apropos, the other day I opened Lawrence's "Pansies" once more at random and found this :

> I can't stand Willy Wet-leg
> Can't stand him at any price.
> He's resigned and when you hit him
> He lets you hit him twice.

Well, well, this is the bare, rocky, direct poetry? God help us! This is the sort of thing to which theories lead even a man of genius.

D. H. Lawrence—Human Ego-Centricity—Attitude Towards Human Defects

I MUST read Huxley's preface and glance at some letters before venturing on any comments—like the reviewers who frisk about, a page here and a page there, and then write an ample or devastating review. Anyhow it seems to me Lawrence must have been a difficult man to live with, even for him it must have been difficult to live with himself. His photograph confirms that view. But a man at war with himself can write excellent poetry—if he is a poet; often better poetry than another, just as Shakespeare wrote his best tragedies when he was in a state of chaotic upheaval; at least so his interpreters say. But one needs a higher and more calm and poised inspiration to write poems of harmony and divine balance than any Lawrence ever had. I stick to my idea of the evil influence of theories on a man of genius. If he had been contented to write things of beauty instead of bare rockies and

dry deserts, he might have done splendidly and ranked among the great poets.

All great personalities have a strong ego of one kind or another—for that matter it does not need to be a big personality to be ego-centred; ego-centricity is the very nature of life in the Ignorance, —even the sattwic man, the philanthropist, the altruist live for and round their ego. Society imposes an effort to restrain and when one cannot restrain at least to disguise it; morality enjoins on us to control, enlarge, refine or sublimate it so that it shall be able to exceed itself or use itself in the service of things bigger than its own primary egoism. But none of these things enables one to escape from it. It is only by finding something deep within or above ourselves and making *laya* (dissolution) of the ego in that that it is possible. It is what Lawrence saw and it was his effort to do it that made him "other" than those who associated with him—but he could not find out the way. It was a strange mistake to seek it in sexuality; it was also a great mistake to seek it at the wrong end of the nature.

What you say about the discovery of the defects of human nature is no doubt true. Human nature is full of defects and cannot be otherwise, but there are other elements and possibilities in it which,

although never quite unmixed, have to be seen to get a whole view. But the discovery of the truth about human beings need not lead to cynicism; it may lead to a calm aloofness and irony which has nothing disappointed or bitter in it; or it may lead to a large psychic charity which recognises the truth but makes all allowances and is ready to love and to help in spite of all. In the spiritual consciousness one is blind to nothing, but sees also that which is within behind these coverings, the divine element not yet released, and is neither deceived nor repelled and discouraged. That inner greater thing that was in Lawrence and which he sought for is in everybody: he may not have found it and his defects may have prevented its release, but it is there.

I do not know about the lovableness; what you say is partly true, but lovableness may exist in spite of ego and all kinds of defects and people may feel it.

Wordsworth's Realisation

I AM rather astonished at your finding Wordsworth's realisation, however mental and incomplete, to be abstract and vague or dictated by emotional effervescence. Wordsworth's was hardly an emotional

or effervescent character. As for an abstract realisation, it sounds like a round square; I have never had one myself and find it difficult to believe in it. But certainly a realisation in its beginning can be vague and nebulous or it can be less or more vivid. Still, Wordsworth did not make that impression on me and to him it certainly seemed as something positive, wonderfully luminous, direct, powerful and determinative. He stayed there and went no farther, did not get to the source, because more was hardly possible in his time and surroundings, at least to a man of his moral and intellectual temper. In a more deep and spiritual sense a concrete realisation is that which makes the thing realised more real, dynamic, intimately present to the consciousness than any physical thing can be. Such a concrete spiritual realisation whether of the personal Divine or of the impersonal Brahman or of the Self does not, except in rare cases, come at or anywhere near the beginning of a sadhana, in the first years or for many years: one has to go deep to get it and deeper to keep it. But a vivid and very personal sense of a spirit or infinite in Nature can very well come in a flash and remain strongly behind a man's outlook on the universe.

Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner"

MAY I say a word about the four lines of Coleridge which you criticise?—

> He prayeth best who loveth best
> All things both great and small,
> For the dear God who loveth us—
> He made and loveth all.

The sentimentalism of the "dear God" is obviously extra childlike and may sound childish even. If it had been written by Coleridge as his own contribution to thought or his personal feeling described in its native language it would have ranked him very low. But Coleridge was a great metaphysician or at any rate an acute and wide-winged thinker, not a sentimental prattling poet of the third order. Mark that the idea in the lines is not essentially poor; otherwise expressed it could rank among great thoughts and stand as the basis of a philosophy and ethics founded on *bhakti*. There are one or two lines of the Gita which are based on a similar thought, though from the Vedantic, not the dualist point of view. But throughout the "Ancient Mariner" Coleridge is looking at things from the point of view and the state of mind of the most simple and

childlike personality possible, the Ancient Mariner who feels and thinks only with the barest ideas and the most elementary and primitive emotions. The lines he writes here record the feeling which such a mind and heart would draw from what he had gone through. Are they not then perfectly in place and just in the right tone for such a purpose? You may say that it lowers the tone of the poem. I don't know—the tone of the poem is deliberately intended to be that of an unsophisticated ballad simplicity and ballad mentality—it is not the ideas but the extraordinary beauty of rhythm and vividness of vision and fidelity to a certain mystic childlike key that makes it such a wonderful and perfect poem. This is of course only a point of view; but it came to me several times as an answer that could be made to your criticism, so I put it on paper.

Browning

My opinion of Browning has been expressed, I think, in "The Future Poetry". I had a fervent passion for him when I was from seventeen to eighteen, after a previous *penchant* for Tennyson; but like most calf-love both these fancies were of

short duration. While I had it, I must have gone through most of his writings (*Fifine at the Fair* and some others excepted) some half a dozen times at least. There is much stuff of thought in him, seldom of great depth but sometimes unexpected and subtle, a vast range not so much of character as of dramatic human moods, and a considerable power and vigour of rough verse and rugged language. But there is very little of the pure light of poetry in him or of sheer poetic beauty or charm and magic; he gets the highest or finest inspiration only in a line or two here and there. His expression is often not only rough and hasty but inadequate; in his later work he becomes tiresome. He is not one of the greatest poets, but he is a great creator.

5-12-1931

Baudelaire

BAUDELAIRE was never vulgar—he was too refined and perfect an artist to be that. He chose the evil of life as his frequent subject and tried to extract poetic beauty out of it, as a painter may deal with a subject that to the ordinary eye may be ugly

or repellent and extract artistic beauty from it. But that is not the only stuff of his poetry.

22-7-1936

Michael Madhusudan

I HAD once the regret that the line of possibility opened out by Michael Madhusudan was not carried any further in Bengali poetry; but after all it may turn out that nothing has been lost by the apparent interruption. Magnificent as are the power and swing of his language and rhythm, there was a default of richness and thought-matter, and a development in which subtlety, fineness and richness of thought and feeling could learn to find a consummate expression was very much needed. More mastery of colour, form and design was a necessity as well as more depth and wealth in the thought-substance—and this has now been achieved and, if added to the *ojas*, can fulfil what Madhusudan left only half done.

Great Prose-Writers

I STAND rather aghast at your summons to stand and deliver the names of the ten or twelve best prose styles in the world's literature. I had no names in mind and I used the incautious phrase only to indicate the high place I thought Bankim held among the great masters of language. To rank the poets on different grades of the Hill of poetry is a pastime which may be a little frivolous and unnecessary, but possible, if not altogether permissible. I would not venture to try the same game with the prose-writers who are multitudinous and do not present the same marked and unmistakable differences of level and power. The prose field is a field, it is not a mountain. It has eminences, but its high tops are not so high, the drops not so low as in poetical literature.

Then again there are great writers in prose and great prose-writers and the two are by no means the same thing. Dickens and Balzac are great novelists, but their style or their frequent absence of style had better not be described; Scott attempts a style, but it is neither blameless nor is it his distinguishing merit. Other novelists have an adequate style and a good one but their prose is not quoted as a model and they are remembered not

for that but as creators. You speak of Meredith, and if Meredith had always written with as pure a mastery as he did in *Richard Feverel* he might have figured as a pre-eminent master of language, but the creator and the thinker played many tricks on the stylist in the bulk of his work. I was writing of prose styles and what was in my mind was those achievements in which language reached its acme of perfection in one manner or another so that whatever the writer touched became a thing of beauty—no matter what its substance—or a perfect form and memorable. Bankim seemed to me to have achieved that in his own way as Plato in his or Cicero or Tacitus in theirs or in French literature, Voltaire, Flaubert or Anatole France. I could name many more, especially in French which is the greatest store-house of fine prose among the world's languages—there is no other to match it. Matthew Arnold once wrote a line that runs something like this:

France great in all great arts, in none supreme,

to which some one very aptly replied, "And what then of the art of prose-writing? Is it not a great art and what other country can approach France there? All prose of other languages seems beside its perfection, lucidity, measure almost clumsy."

There are many remarkable prose-writers in English, but that essential or fundamental perfection which is almost like a second nature to the French writers is not so common. The great prose-writers in English seem to seize you by the personality they express in their styles rather than by its perfection as an instrument—it is true at least of the earliest and I think too of the later writers. Lamb whom you mention is a signal example of a writer who erected his personality into a style and lives by that achievement—Pater and Wilde are other examples.

As for Bengali, we have had Bankim and have still Tagore and Sarat Chatterji. That is sufficient achievement for a single century.

I have not answered your question—but I have explained my phrase and I think that is all you can expect from me.

Intellectual Capacity of Mystics *

THERE have been any number of spiritual men and mystics who have had a great and fine intellectual

* These remarks are *apropos* of a statement of a famous scientist that mystics and spiritual men the world over have in general been always men of very average intelligence, a handful of rare instances excepted.

capacity or were endowed with a great administrative and organising ability implying a keen knowledge of men and much expenditure of brain-power. With a little looking up of the records of the past I think one could collect some hundreds of names which would not include of course the still greater number not recorded in history or the transmitted memory of the past.

The Mystic and the Intellectual—Bernard Shaw

A MYSTIC is currently supposed to be one who has mystic experience, and a mystic philosopher is one who has such experience and has formed a view of life in harmony with his experience. Merely to have metaphysical notions about the Infinite and Godhead and underlying or overshadowing forces does not make a man a mystic. One would never think of applying such a term to Spinoza, Kant or Hegel: even Plato does not fit into the term, though Pythagoras has a good claim to it. Hegel and other transcendental or idealistic philosophers were great intellects, not mystics. Shaw is a keen and forceful

intellect (I cannot call him a great thinker*) but his ideas about the Life-Force certainly do not make him a mystic. And do you really call that a constructive vision of life—a vague notion about a Life-Force pushing towards an evolutionary manifestation and a brilliant *jeu d'esprit* about long life and people born out of eggs and certain extraordinary operations of mind and body in these semi-immortals who seem to have been very much at a loss what to do with their immortality? I do not deny that there are keen and brilliant ideas and views everywhere (that is Shaw's wealthy stock-in-trade), even an occasional profound perception; but that does not make a man either a mystic or a philosopher or a great thought-creator. Shaw has a sufficiently high place in his own kind—why try to make him out more than he is? Shakespeare is a great poet and dramatist, but to try to make him out a great philosopher also would not increase but rather imperil his high repute.

* An admirable many-sided intelligence and an acute critic discussing penetratingly or discoursing acutely or constructively on many problems or presenting with force or point many aspects of life, he is not a creator or disseminator of the great illuminating ideas that leave their mark on the centuries.

Estimate of Bernard Shaw

I DO not think Harris's attack on Shaw as you describe it can be taken very seriously any more than can Wells's jest about his pronunciation of English being the sole astonishing thing about him. Wells, Chesterton, Shaw and others joust at each other like the *kabiwalas* of old Calcutta, though with more refined weapons, and you cannot take their humourous sparrings as considered appreciations; if you do, you turn exquisite jests into solemn nonsense. Mark that their method in these sparrings, the turn of phrase, the style of their wit is borrowed from Shaw himself with personal modifications; for this kind of humour, light as air and sharp as a razor-blade, epigrammatic, paradoxical, often flavoured with burlesque seriousness and urbane hyperbole, good-humoured and cutting at once, is not English in origin; it was brought in by two Irishmen, Shaw and Wilde. Harris's stroke about the Rodin bust and Wells's sally are entirely in the Shavian turn and manner, they are showing their cleverness by spiking their guru in swordsmanship with his own rapier. Harris's attack on Shaw's literary reputation may have been serious, there was a sombre and violent brutality about him which made it possible; but his main motive was to prolong his own notoriety

by a clever and vigorous assault on the mammoth of the hour. Shaw himself supplied materials for his critic, knowing well what he would write, and edited* this damaging assault on his own fame, a typical Irish act at once of chivalry, shrewd calculation of effect and whimsical humour. I should not think Harris had much understanding of Shaw the man as apart from the writer; the Anglo-Saxon is not usually capable of understanding either Irish character or Irish humour, it is so different from his own. And Shaw is Irish through and through; there is nothing English about him except the language he writes and even that he has changed into the Irish ease, flow, edge and clarity—though not bringing into it, as Wilde did, Irish poetry and colour.

Shaw's seriousness and his humour, real seriousness and mock seriousness, run into each other in a baffling inextricable *mélange,* thoroughly Irish in its character—for it is the native Irish turn to speak lightly when in dead earnest and to utter the most extravagant jests with a profound air of seriousness,—and it so puzzled the British public that they could not for a long time make up their mind

* F. Harris's biography of Shaw, edited and published by Shaw himself after Harris's death.

how to take him. At first they took him for a Jester dancing with cap and bells, then for a new kind of mocking Hebrew Prophet or Puritan reformer! Needless to say, both judgments were entirely out of focus. The Irishman is, on one side of him, the vital side, a *passioné*, imaginative and romantic, intensely emotional, violently impulsive, easily inspired to poetry or rhetoric, moved by indignation and suffering to a mixture of aggressive militancy, wistful dreaming and sardonic extravagant humour; on the other side, he is keen in intellect, positive, downright, hating all loose foggy sentimentalism and solemn pretence and prone, in order to avoid the appearance of them in himself, to cover himself with a jest at every step; it is at once his mask and his defence. At bottom he has the possibility in him of a modern Curtius leaping into the yawning pit for a cause, a Utopist or a Don Quixote,—according to occasions, a fighter for dreams, an idealistic pugilist, a knight-errant, a pugnacious rebel or a brilliant sharp-minded realist or a reckless but often shrewd and successful adventurer. Shaw has all that in him, but with it a cool intellectual clearness, also Irish, which dominates it all and tones it down, subdues it into measure and balance, gives an even harmonising colour. There is as a result a brilliant tempered edge of flame, lambent, lighting up what it attacks

and destroys, and destroying it by the light it throws upon it, not fiercely but trenchantly—though with a trenchant playfulness—aggressive and corrosive. An ostentation of humour and parade covers up the attack and puts the opponent off his defence. That is why the English mind never understood Shaw and yet allowed itself to be captured by him, and its old established ideas, "moral" positions, impenetrable armour of commercialised Puritanism and self-righteous Victorian assurance to be ravaged and burned out of existence by Shaw and his allies. Anyone who knew Victorian England and sees the difference now cannot but be struck by it, and Shaw's part in it, at least in preparing and making it possible, is undeniable. That is why I call him devastating, not in any ostentatiously catastrophic sense, for there is a quietly trenchant type of devastatingness, because he has helped to lay low all these things with his scythe of sarcastic mockery and lightly, humorously penetrating seriousness—effective, as you call it, but too deadly in its effects to be called merely effective.

That is Shaw as I have seen him and I don't believe there is anything seriously wrong in my estimate. I don't think we can complain of his seriousness about Pacifism, Socialism and the rest of it; it was simply the form in which he put his dream,

the dream he needed to fight for, needed by his Irish nature. Shaw's bugbear was unreason and disorder, his dream was a humanity delivered from vital illusions and deceptions, organising the life-force in obedience to reason, casting out waste and folly as much as possible. It is not likely to happen in the way he hoped; reason has its own illusions and, though he strove against imprisonment in his own rationalistic ideals, trying to escape from them by the issue of his mocking critical humour, he could not help being their prisoner. As for his pose of self-praise, no doubt he valued himself,—the public fighter like the man of action needs to do so in order to act or to fight. Most, though not all, try to veil it under an affectation of modesty; Shaw, on the contrary, took the course of raising it to a humorous pitch of burlesque and extravagance. It was at once part of his strategy in commanding attention and a means of mocking at himself—I was not speaking of analytical self-mockery, but of the whimsical Irish kind—so as to keep himself straight and at the same time mocking his audience. It is a peculiarly Irish kind of humour to say extravagant things with a calm convinced tone as if announcing a perfectly serious proposition —the Irish exaggeration of the humour called by the French *pince-sans-rire*; his hyperboles of

self-praise actually reek with this humorous savour. If his extravagant comparison of himself with Shakespeare had to be taken in dull earnest with no smile in it, he would be either a witless ass or a giant of humourless arrogance,—and Bernard Shaw could be neither.

As to his position in literature, I have given my opinion; but more precisely, I imagine he will take some place but not a very large place, once the drums have ceased beating and the fighting is over. He has given too much to the battles of the hour perhaps to claim a large share of the future. I suppose some of his plays will survive for their wit and humour and cleverness more than for any higher dramatic quality, like those of three other Irishmen: Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde. His prefaces may be saved by their style and force, but it is not sure. At any rate, as a personality he is not likely to be forgotten, even if his writings fade. To compare him with Anatole France is futile—they were minds too different and moving in too different domains for comparison to be possible.

Wells—Chesterton—Shaw

I REFUSE to accept the men you name, with the exception of Russell, as serious thinkers. Wells is a super-journalist, super-pamphleteer and story-teller. I imagine that within a generation of his death his speculations will cease to be read or remembered; his stories may endure longer. Chesterton is a brilliant essayist who has written verse too of an appreciable brilliance and managed some good stories. Unlike Wells he has some gift of style and he has caught the trick of wit and constant paradox which gives a fictitious semblance of enhanced value to his ideas. These are men of a high and wide contemporary fame but we are not sure how long their work will last, though we may venture to predict some durability for a good part of Chesterton's poetry and Wells' short stories. Shaw has a better chance of lasting, but there is no certain certitude, because he has no pre-eminent height or greatness in his constructive powers. He has constructed nothing supreme, but he has criticised most things. In page after page he shows the dissolvent critical mind and it is a dissolvent of great power; beyond that he has popularised the ideas of Fabian socialism and other constructive view-points caught up by him from the surrounding

atmosphere, but with temperamental qualifications and variations, for the inordinately critical character of his mind prevents him from entirely agreeing with anybody. Criticism is also a great power and there are some mainly critical minds that have become immortals, Voltaire for instance; Shaw on his own level may survive—only, his thinking is more of a personal type and not classic and typical of a fundamental current of the human intellect like Voltaire's. His personality may help him as Johnson was helped by his personality to live.

Shaw is not really a dramatist; I don't think he ever wrote anything in the manner of the true drama; *Candida* is perhaps the nearest he came to one. He is a first-class play-writer,—a brilliant conversationalist in stage dialogue and a manufacturer of speaking intellectualised puppets made to develop and represent by their talk and carefully wire-pulled movements his ideas about men, life and things. He gives his characters minds of various quality and they are expressing their minds all the time; sometimes he paints on them some striking vital colour, but with a few exceptions they are not living beings like those of the great or even of the lesser dramatists. There are, however, exceptions, such as the three characters in *Candida*, and as a supremely clever playwright with a strong intel-

lectual force and some genius he may very well survive. He has a very striking and cogent and incisive style admirably fitted for its work, and he sometimes tries his hand at eloquence, but "heights of passionate eloquence" is a very unreal phrase. I never found that in Shaw anywhere; whatever mental ardours he may have, his mind as a whole is too cool, balanced, incisive to let itself go in that manner.

Shaw as a Creative Mind

I FIND in Shavianism a delightful note and am thankful to Shaw for being so refreshingly different from other men that to read even an ordinary interview with him in a newspaper is an intellectual pleasure. As for his being one of the most original personalities of the age, there can be no doubt of that. All that I deny to him is a great creative mind—but his critical force, especially in certain fields, and his discrimination of values in life are very great and in those fields he can in a sense be called creative and have remarkable scope and *envergure*. He has certainly created a singularly effective and living form for his criticism of life. It is not strictly drama, but it

is something original and strong and altogether of its own kind—so, up to that limit, I qualify my statement that Shaw was not pre-eminent as a creator.

The tide may turn against him after being so strongly for him under compulsion from his own power and will, but nothing can alter the fact that he was one of the keenest and most powerful minds of the age with an originality in his way of looking at things which no one else in his time could equal. He is too penetrating and sincere a mind to be a stiff partisan or tied to some intellectual dogma or other. When he sees something which qualifies the "ism"—even that on whose side he is standing, he says so; that need not weaken the ideal behind,—on the contrary it is likely to make it more plastic and practicable.

Bertrand Russell

About Russell—I have never disputed his abilities or his character; I am concerned only with his opinions and there too only with those opinions which touch upon my own province—that of spiritual Truth. In all religions, the most narrow and stupid even, and in all non-religions also there are great

minds, great men, fine characters. I know little about Russell, but I never dreamed of disputing the greatness of Lenin, for instance, merely because he was an atheist—nobody would, unless he were an imbecile. But the greatness of Lenin does not debar me from refusing assent to the credal dogmas of Bolshevism, and the beauty of character of an atheist does not prove that spirituality is a lie of the imagination and that there is no Divine. I might add that if you can find the utterances of famous Yogis childish when they talk about marriage or on other mental matters, I cannot be blamed for finding the ideas of Russell about spiritual experience, of which he knows nothing, very much wanting in light and substance. You have not named the Yogis in question, and till you do, I am afraid I shall cherish a suspicion about either the height or the breadth of their spiritual experience.

Comment on a Statement of B. Russell *

I HAVE not forgotten Russell but I have neglected him, first, for want of time; second, because for the

* "We are all prone to the malady of the introvert, who, with the manifold spectacle of the world spread out before him, turns away and gazes upon the emptiness within." B. Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*.

moment I have mislaid your letter; third, because of lack of understanding on my part. What is the meaning of "taking interest in external things for their own sakes?" And what is an introvert? Both these problems baffle me.

The word "introvert" has come into existence only recently and sounds like a companion of "pervert". Literally, it means one who is turned inwards. The Upanishad speaks of the doors of the senses that are turned outwards absorbing man in external things ("for their own sakes", I suppose?) and of the rare man among a million who turns his vision inwards and sees the self. Is that man an introvert? And is Russell's ideal man "interested in externals for their own sakes"—a Ramaswami the chef or Joseph the chauffeur, for instance—homo externalis Russellius, an extrovert? Or is an introvert one who has an inner life stronger than his external one,—the poet, the musician, the artist? Was Beethoven in his deafness bringing out music from within him an introvert? Or does it mean one who measures external things by an inner standard and is interested in them not "for their own sakes" but for their value to the soul's self-development, its psychic, religious, ethical or other self-expression? Are Tolstoy and Gandhi examples of introverts? Or in another field—Goethe? Or does it mean one who cares for

external things only as they touch his own mind or else concern his own ego? But that I suppose would include 999,999 men out of every million.

What are external things? Russell is a mathematician. Are mathematical formulae external things even though they exist here only in the World-mind and the mind of Man? If not, is Russell, as mathematician, an introvert? Again, Yajnavalkya says that one loves the wife not for the sake of the wife, but for the self's sake, and so with other objects of interest or desire—whether the self be the inner self or the ego. In yoga it is the valuing of external things in the terms of the desire of the ego that is discouraged—their only value is their value in the manifestation of the Divine. Who desires external things "for their own sake" and not for some value to the conscious being? Even Cheloo, the day-labourer, is not interested in a two-anna piece for its own sake, but for some vital satisfaction it can bring him; even with the hoarding miser it is the same —it is his vital being's passion for possession that he satisfies and that is something not external but internal, part of his inner make-up, the unseen personality that moves inside behind the veil of the body.

What then is meant by Russell's "for their own sakes"? If you enlighten me on these points, I

may still make an effort to comment on his *maha-vakya.*

More important is his wonderful phrase about the "emptiness within"; on that at least I hope to make a comment one day or another.

Anatole France *

ANATOLE France is always amusing whether he is ironising about God and Christianity or about the rational animal man or Humanity (with a big H) and the follies of his reason and his conduct. But I presume you never heard of God's explanation of his

* This is *apropos* of a quotation from Anatole France which Dilip Kumar Roy had sent to Sri Aurobindo, saying, "Brotteaux, one of the unabashed scoffers in Anatole France's *Dieux ont Soif*, throws this hearty fling at God in the face of Father Longuemare, the pious Priest...

'Either God would prevent evil if he could, but could not, or he could but would not, or he neither could nor would, or he both would and could. If he would but could not, he is impotent, if he could but would not, he is perverse, if he neither could nor would he is at once impotent and perverse; if he both could and would why on earth hasn't he done it Father?'

I send this to you as I immensely enjoyed the joke and am sure you would too, hoping you would have something to fend it off with."

non-interference to Anatole France when they met in some Heaven of Irony, I suppose—it can't have been in the heaven of Karl Marx, in spite of France's conversion before his death. God is reported to have strolled up to him and said: "I say, Anatole, you know that was a good joke of yours; but there was a good cause too for my non-interference. Reason came along and told me: 'Look here, why do you pretend to exist? You know you don't exist and never existed or, if you do, you have made such a mess of your creation that we can't tolerate you any longer. Once we have got you out of the way all will be right upon earth, tip-top, A-I; my daughter Science and I have arranged that between us. Man will raise his noble brow, the head of creation, dignified, free, equal, fraternal, democratic, depending upon nothing but himself, with nothing greater than himself anywhere in existence. There will be no God, no gods, no churches, no priestcraft, no religion, no kings, no oppression, no poverty, no war or discord anywhere. Industry will fill the earth with abundance, Commerce will spread her golden reconciling wings everywhere. Universal education will stamp out ignorance and leave no room for folly or unreason in any human brain; man will become cultured, disciplined, rational, scientific, well-informed, arriving always at the right conclusion upon

full and sufficient data. The voice of the scientists and the experts will be loud in the land and guide mankind to the earthly paradise. A perfected society; health universalised by a developed medical science and a sound hygiene; everything rationalised; science evolved, infallible, omnipotent, omniscient; the riddle of existence solved; the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the world; evolution, of which man, magnificent man, is the last term, completed in the noble white race; a humanitarian kindness and uplifting for our backward brown, yellow and black brothers; peace, peace, peace, reason, order, unity everywhere'. There was a lot more like that, Anatole, and I was so much impressed by the beauty of the picture and its convenience, for I would have nothing to do or to supervise, that I at once retired from business—for, you know that I was always of a retiring disposition and inclined to keep myself behind the veil or in the background at the best of times. But what is this I hear? It does not seem to me from reports that Reason even with the help of Science has kept her promise. And if not, why not? Is it because she would not, or because she could not? Or is it because she both would not and could not? Or because she both would and could, but somehow did not? And I say, Anatole, these children of theirs,

the State, Industrialism, Capitalism, Communism and the rest have a queer look; they seem very much like Titanic monsters armed, too, with all the powers of Intellect and all the weapons and organisation of Science! And it does look as if mankind were no freer under them than under the Kings and the Churches!! What has happened?—or is it possible that Reason is not supreme and infallible, even that she has made a greater mess of it than I could have done myself?!!!" Here the report of the conversation ends; I give it for what it is worth, for I am not acquainted with this God and have to take him on trust from Anatole France.

Bhatkhande

YES, I have read your article on Bhatkhande. Very interesting: the character came home to me as a sublimation of a type I was very familiar with when in Baroda. Very amusing his encounters with the pundits—especially the Socratic way of self-depreciation heightened almost to the Japanese pitch. His photograph you sent me shows a keen and powerful face full of genius and character.

February, 1937